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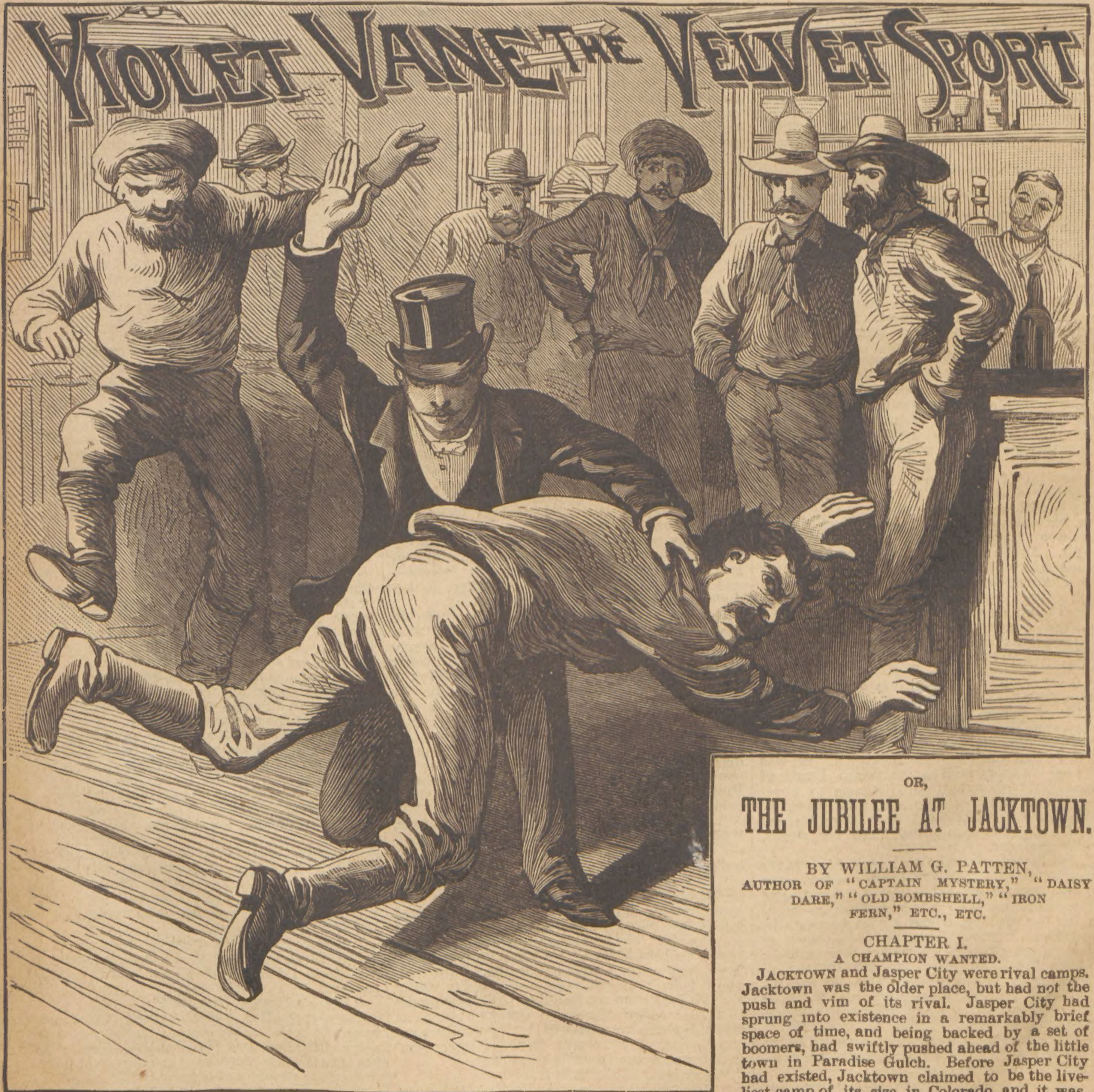
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OR, THE JUBILEE AT JACKTOWN.

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AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN MYSTERY," "DAISY
DARE," "OLD BOMBSHELL," "IRON
FERN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. A CHAMPION WANTED.

JACKTOWN and Jasper City were rival camps. Jacktown was the older place, but had not the push and vim of its rival. Jasper City had sprung into existence in a remarkably brief space of time, and being backed by a set of boomers, had swiftly pushed ahead of the little town in Paradise Gulch. Before Jasper City had existed, Jacktown claimed to be the liveliest camp of its size in Colorado, and it was, therefore, with feelings of mingled rage and re-

"BASTE 'IM, VIOLETS! HAIN'T THET DEELIGHTFUL! OH, MOSES! HAIN'T THIS A JUBILEE!"

gret that its inhabitants saw the place robbed of its glory. But one by one the good men of Jacktown deserted the camp and took up their abode in the rival settlement, and slowly the state of affairs in the unfortunate place grew worse and worse.

"Sumthin's got ter be did," was the universal decision of the men of Jacktown.

Many of the solid citizens of the camp in Paradise Gulch believed that the only thing which would save the place was the appearance of a capitalist who would be willing to invest a large sum of money in opening up some of the promising lodes which had been located in that immediate vicinity. The "Mountain Queen" was the only mine in operation, and the company who were working it was said to be far from solid, causing a feeling of insecurity, despite the fact that the mine was paying fairly well.

There were others who believed that could Jacktown secure some peculiar attraction which would draw the attention of the surrounding country, its merits would soon become known to the world, and once more the place would boom. Jasper City had been built by boomers who knew their business well, and when these unscrupulous sharks had filled their pockets, they would steal quietly away, and Jacktown's rival would suffer a disastrous collapse.

One of the first things which the boomers of Jasper City did was to induce the best men of Jacktown to desert that camp. Among the men thus secured by Jasper City were Saul Spot, the champion dead-shot of that section, and James Carnes—"Hickory Jimmy"—a wonderful wrestler and athlete. High Card Harry, said to be the best short-card player in the State, also took up a residence in the boomers' camp.

Jasper City sneered at Jacktown in an open manner, and the men of the new camp would smile with scorn whenever the little town in Paradise Gulch was mentioned as a rival. Jacktown, they declared, was doomed.

This scorn on the part of the men of Jasper City exasperated the citizens of Jacktown, and kept the two camps constantly at sword's points. Residents of the rival camps could not meet without an exchange of hot words and a pitched battle, in which the Jacktownites almost always suffered the most. Day by day the hatred of the two camps waxed more intense.

Of course, among its inhabitants Jasper City could reckon a few women, but they were mostly of a class of which the camp could not be very proud, and there was not one genuinely handsome woman among them.

One day the stage brought a strange woman—or rather girl, for she was not over eighteen—to Jacktown. The crowd which was present at the arrival of the stage, stared at the girl in breathless amazement. They saw a bewilderingly handsome creature with dark hair, blue eyes, red lips and a peach-like complexion. Her form was a trifle petite and as graceful as a fawn's. As she descended from "the hearse," a glimpse of a small, round ankle and pretty foot was obtained by the staring throng. Something in the appearance of the gawking crowd seemed to amuse her, for her lips parted in a faint smile, exposing a gleam of white teeth and some delicate dimples. Then she passed lightly up the steps and disappeared within the Silver Bell Hotel.

"Good Lawd!" gasped one of the throng. "Wazn't she er stunner!"

Then every man drew a long breath, and almost as one person, responded:

"You bet yer boots!"

Then there was a stir in Jacktown. It was not long ere every man in the camp heard of the new arrival, and all were desirous to know who she was and how long she was going to stay. They were delighted when they learned that she might remain in that place for weeks, or even months.

Judge Blowbugle, who took upon himself the honor of representing Jacktown, called upon her and learned several things of interest. Her name was Luona Howard, and she was searching for her brother, whom she supposed to be somewhere in the West. She was tired of moving from place to place, and was willing to settle down and wait for her brother to come to her. The pompous judge did his best to make Jacktown appear like a Paradise on Earth, and succeeded in causing her to say that she would stop there.

When the judge reported to the crowd in the saloon below, it was with difficulty they restrained their enthusiasm.

"Stay? To be course she shall!" cried one big fellow. "Jasper City 'ill hav' ter haul in

its horns now. Hooraw fer ther Queen o' Jacktown!"

There was no repressing the wild cheer which the delighted fellows gave. Then Dandy Dirk, the proprietor of the hotel and saloon, sprung upon the bar.

"Attention, pards!" he shouted. "The very attraction that we have been longing for has come to us. You have given her the title of Queen of Jacktown, and a veritable queen she shall be. From this hour her word is law, and let him who dares disobey look out! While she remains beneath this roof, everything I possess is hers, and not one cent shall be charged. We will make Jasper City hang its head with shame. But, from this hour all rows and riots must be settled beyond the limits of the camp, and the first galoot who creates a disturbance beneath this roof, I will call to account."

This speech was greeted with applause.

The strange girl seemed quite at home in the rough camp, and had a smile and pleasant word for every one. She seemed overflowing with high spirits, and more than one rough fellow declared that her laugh was the sweetest music he had ever heard. She soon became known as Laughing Lu. Despite her familiarity with the men of the camp, there was a certain air about her which warned them to keep at a respectful distance and constantly guard their tongues. Every one seemed to feel that it would be as much as a man's life was worth to offer her insult.

The news of the addition to Jacktown's population soon reached Jasper City, and in a short time the latter camp was boiling with rage and envy. Wonderful were the tales told of the beauty of Jacktown's Queen. The men of Jasper City quickly decided on a bold move.

It was high noon one day when into Jacktown camp rode almost every male citizen of Jasper City. Every man was armed to the teeth, and all looked desperate and determined. Jacktown was taken by surprise, and found itself unable to offer any resistance. While the men of Jasper City held the citizens of Jacktown quiet, a delegation of the best-appearing citizens of the boomers' camp called on Laughing Lu.

An hour later the men of Jasper City rode out of Jacktown, with Miss Howard mounted on a fine horse in their midst, a smooth-tongued member of the delegation having induced her to leave the camp for its more successful rival. As they left the camp in Paradise Gulch, they sent back a parting cheer of mingled derision and delight.

It is impossible to describe the excitement that ensued in Jacktown. Not a man of the camp worked during the remainder of the day, and the citizens gathered on the streets and in the saloons to discuss this last great outrage heaped upon them by the boomers' camp. The bar of the Silver Bell Saloon did a rushing business, and Dandy Dirk did his best to fan the flame of fury to a larger blaze.

The day passed, night came, and still the excitement showed no signs of abating. But, at last, the citizens were overcome by fatigue—and Dandy Dirk's liquor—and forced to lay themselves away until the following day.

It was a hard-looking crowd that gathered in the Silver Bell the next forenoon. Bleary eyes and swelled heads were numerous, and nearly every one was thirsty. The only man among them who seemed to have stood the racket in good shape was Judge Blowbugle, and he was as fresh as a flower and as lively as a grasshopper. The judge had an established reputation for his ability to "punish" bad liquor.

Gradually the crowd "fired up," and their indignation at the outrage of the day before seemed increasing rather than diminishing. Finally Judge Blowbugle mounted a small table.

"Feller-citizens," he cried in a loud tone, "give me yer 'tention fer a short time."

"Fire erway, jedge," cried Blizzard Ben, the bully of the camp.

"It is needless ter call yer 'tention ter ther recent diabolical outrage heaped onter this hyer camp by ther skunks uv Jasper City," pursued the judge, throwing back his shoulders and waving aloft his right hand, which held a red bandanna handkerchief. "Ye all know uv thet. Ther lyin' critters stole our queen. How they dun it I don't purtend ter say, but I'm willin' ter bet er gallon uv Dandy's 'kill 'em quick' thet ther before-mentioned skunks made out thet this camp was infested by boss-thieves an' cut-throats. They scared ther gal inter goin' with 'em. Are we goin' ter stan' it?"

"No!" shouted the listeners.

"Right!" and again the judge waved that red bandanna. "Right! We will not tamely sub-

mit to ther insults heaped upon us by ther skunks uv Jasper City. But, in Jasper they hav' Saul Spot, High Card Harry and Hickory Jimmy. Until we hav' a match for each an' every one uv them, we've got ter take er back seat. W'at we want is er man who kin down 'em all—one man who kin wipe out ther champions uv Jasper. W'en we secure thet man, Jacktown will lift its head proudly to ther skies once more, an' heaven will smile upon us. Prosperity will return; Jasper will fade like ther mornin' mist before ther sun; Jacktown will be all thet is grand an' glorious. We want er champion—er Hercules—er Sampson to pit erg'in' Jacktown's foes. Whar's ther man?"

"Whoop-ee! I'm ther sweet-scented posey w'at yer lookin' arter. Jest turn yer rosate mug this deerection, an' allow yer optics ter scan ther woolly-headed man frum 'Way Back. My name is Wagg!"

The speaker was a stranger in town.

CHAPTER II.

THE "WOOLLY-HEADED MAN."

JUST within the doorway he stood, his dilapidated hat in one hand, bowing and grinning in a comical manner. His clothes were decidedly ragged, and a pair of enormous boots covered his feet. His face was beardless, homely, but good-natured in appearance. The crowning curiosity about the stranger was his hair, which was white and curly, closely resembling the wool of a sheep.

"Pilgrims," grinned this strange individual, "allow me to interjuce merself: I am E. Wagg, Esq., often called ther 'riginal woolly-headed man. My front name is Erastus. I'm er hard crowd ter rassil with, an' whar I cum frum they call me er big chief. Ef this hyer town's lookin' arter a champion, I am ther tulip ye wants."

With these words, he tripped into the room, and executed a clumsy shuffle in the middle of the floor.

"Whoop-ee!" he squealed. "I'm ther champion poker-player frum ther town o' Red Hot! I'm er luller with er shooter, an' er swunger with mer dukes. Trot out yer b-a-a-d men an' let me git at 'em! I've cum down ter see ye, an' I'm hyer ter stay. Ef ye want er man ter clean out ther sports o' Jasper City—waal, I am yer huckleberry. Yoop!"

Cries of derision came from the crowd.

"Fire him out!" shouted a hoarse voice.

Judge Blowbugle frantically waved the red bandanna aloft and roared a command for silence. It was several minutes, however, before he could make himself heard. Gradually the tumult subsided.

"Feller-citizens," cried the judge, winking with the whole side of his face at the crowd, "it is not best ter judge a man allus by his 'pearances. P'raps this stranger kin make good his claim. Ef so, he's ther very man we're lookin' fer."

The judge hoped to have some sport at the woolly-headed man's expense.

"Thet's ther kind o' tork as tickles my hearin' organs," declared Wagg. "Allus give er man er show, is ther right kind o' motter. I kin prove thet I'm er big chief with ther pasteboards. I'm reddy ter play with ther best man o' this hyer camp. Whar's ther galoot as will back me an' sheer half ther boodle?"

Dead silence followed this question.

"Don't speak all ter onc't," implored the stranger, in a hoarse whisper that was heard in all parts of the room.

"Nary man," muttered the vagabond, after several moments had passed. "Too bad! Guess they don't know E. Wagg, Esq., in this hyer camp. Ef I had called fer er backer in ther camp o' Red Hot, er duzen w'd 'a' jumped forr'd, pusses in han'. I'm er stranger in er heathen country. Excuse me while I weep er few."

A hoarse murmur of disgust ran over the throng. The men of Jacktown were in no pleasant mood, and the actions of the ragged stranger angered them. They had "sized him up" as a bragging bumner, who would run at the first sign of danger.

"Bounce him, Ben," cried one.

But, Blizzard Ben shook his head in aversion. "S'pose I'd lay my claws on thet thing!" he snorted.

"Whar's Timmy, ther Rat?"

Timmy, the Rat, was the smallest and most cowardly man in the camp. Inquiry soon developed the fact that the Rat was sleeping off the effects of an overdose of free drinks obtained during the excitement of the day before.

Judge Blowbugle descended from the table where he had made his speech, and slowly

walked around the stranger twice, inspecting him from head to foot.

"An' so you're er big chief, are ye?" asked the judge.

"You bet yer dirty socks!" was Wagg's prompt reply. "I'm er high howler frum Top Notch."

"I'm happy ter make yer 'quaintance," declared the judge, extending a fat hand, which Wagg promptly grasped.

Then Judge Blowbugle, who was unusually stout in his hands, gave the man from Top Notch a fierce grip, but, to his amazement the squeeze was returned with interest.

"Partner," grinned Wagg, as he vigorously shook the judge's paw, "this duz me proud. Northin' makes my buzzum swell with pride like ther hearty grip o' an' hones' man's han'."

"Ouch! Oh! Let go!" squawked the judge. "W'at ther blazes— Ouch! Thunder an' Mars!"

With a look of amazement, Erastus Wagg released the hand, and the pompous citizen of Jacktown danced around in a decidedly undignified manner, holding up a hand which looked crushed and bloodless.

"Ding ye!" growled the judge. "Did ye mean ter squeeze it off?"

The crowd looked a trifle surprised. Perhaps there was more to this bundle of rags than they had suspected.

"Beg pardon," he entreated. "But I'shoor ye thet waz jest er baby grip. I ginerally double ther dose w'en I shake with er man."

Blowbugle was not a courageous person, and did not offer to resent the open insult.

Suddenly the stranger jerked out a pair of long-barreled, rusty revolvers, and without a moment's warning opened fire on a clock which hung against the wall behind the bar. With remarkable rapidity he emptied both weapons, completely shattering the face of the clock.

"Whoopie!" he cried. "I'm er terror w'en I let merself loose! My name is Wagg, an' I'm er hard man ter crowd! Stan' back an' give me room!"

Jerry Day, the barkeeper, looked startled for a moment, then he flushed with anger. Dandy Dick was not in the room at the time.

"You dirty bum!" shouted Jerry. "You shall pay for that!"

"I allus settle my bills," declared Wagg, as he thrust the revolvers out of sight and strode toward the bar. "Hyer's me last red. Give me credit fer thet, an' charge ther rest."

And he slapped a battered dime upon the bar.

Jerry Day uttered an oath and vaulted over the bar. But he returned quite as swiftly, for the vagrant caught him by the collar and a convenient part of his breeches and tossed him back. A great crash followed, as the barkeeper landed in the midst of a mass of empty bottles.

"Yoop!" shouted the new-comer. "I'm er b-a-a-d man ter tackle! Cl'ar ther way hyer an' make room fer Erastus Wagg."

Blizzard Ben had seen enough, and could restrain himself no longer. With a roar like that of a mad bull he charged upon the intruder. Wagg saw him coming, and bolted for the door, through which he swiftly disappeared.

At which moment another stranger stepped into the doorway and confronted Ben, who halted with an ejaculation of amazement.

CHAPTER III.

THE DANDY TENDERFOOT.

"Good Lawd! W'at is it?"

The Blizzard seemed suddenly paralyzed with surprise and astonishment.

In the doorway stood an individual "the like of which" had never before been seen within the limits of Jacktown.

"A dood!" gasped Ben.

The man in the doorway was attired like a dandy from head to foot. He was slightly below medium hight, but his perfect-fitting clothes revealed the fact that his build was as near perfection as a man of his stature could be. Every limb was rounded, full, and muscular, and evidently was full of suppleness and strength. His appearance, as he surveyed the staring crowd, was that of languid surprise.

The dandy's clothes were of black velvet. His feet were incased in patent-leathers. Upon his head he wore a handsome "stovepipe beaver." The bosom of a handsomely polished and immaculate "billed" shirt was exposed by the cut-away of the vest. A standing collar and tie of the latest style adorned his neck, and a first-water diamond gleamed from the midst of the tie. A small bunch of fresh mountain violets was fastened upon the lapel of his coat. Not a weapon was visible upon his person.

The dandy's face was attractive—almost

handsome. His hair and eyes were dark, and a handsome, pointed mustache shaded his mouth. A phrenologist would have said that he was not a man to be crowded, despite his foppish appearance. There was something strangely attractive about his magnetic, piercing eyes.

"Aw—is this the hotel?" he drawled, seeming amazed and startled at having so suddenly attracted the attention of the rough crowd.

For a few moments there was no reply, then Blizzard Ben grasped the situation and hastened to say:

"Yes, pard, this are ther hash-shop o' this hyer camp. Cum' in."

The dandy hesitated a moment, then apparently decided to accept the invitation. He walked slowly in, appearing for the time both awkward and frightened. With nervous haste, he began removing the gloves which concealed his small hands.

An audible snicker ran around the room.

"W'at hav' ye foun', Ben?" inquired one of crowd.

Ben turned toward the throng, a look of utter helplessness on his face.

"Pards, I can't name it," he declared.

Judge Blowbugle came bustling forward, having rubbed his crushed hand until the blood was circulating freely and it once more felt natural.

"Ah! A stranger in camp," he remarked. "My friend, you are fortunate in findin' yer way ter our geelorious town. We welcome you, an' exten' ther han' uv hospitality."

Just as Blowbugle extended his hand, the woolly-headed man stuck his head in at the door and shouted:

"Look out fer er squeezer, ole man!"

The judge jerked back his fat hand, without having touched the dandy's delicate fingers. He had no care for a repetition of the dose which Wagg had given him.

The crowd within the saloon gathered around the velvet dandy and inspected him with great curiosity. They did not attempt to repress their amazement and contempt.

"Whar did it cum frum?"

"Barnum has met wi' er big loss."

"Looker ther Johnny-jump-ups in its button-hoel! Waal, I swear!"

"Looks like it grew in them clothes."

"Shoot ther bat!"

The stranger seemed to grow more and more alarmed, as he glanced around as if in search of an avenue of escape. His apparent fear amused the crowd.

"Hi! Head him!" laughed one. "Don't let him slip ye!"

"Gentlemen," faltered the stranger, "if this is the—aw—hotel, I would like to be shown to a private room."

His speech and manner created a burst of hoarse laughter.

"Ain't he er dew-drop?" chuckled the Blizzard.

"Say, sonny, duz yer mammy know ye'r out?" inquired Tiger Joe, one of the little "fire-eaters" of the camp.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," cried Blowbugle, "stan' back an' give it air! The pore thing looks redly ter swoon."

"You better git outer ther ring, jedge," cried one of the crowd. "Ther tenderfoot may git r'iled an' pull er pop."

"Pull er pop!" snickered the factotum. "W'y, he'd be skeered ter handle er toy pistol!"

"Don't ye be ser shore o' thet now," cried another. "Pearances air mighty kinder deceptive once er twicet in er while. Ye may run erg'in' a snag ef ye fool 'roun' ther velvet dandy, Ole Wobblejaw. I'm bettin' he's wusen condensed chain-lightnin', an' my name's Wagg!"

The woolly-headed man had ventured back into the room.

"Stranger," said Blowbugle, planting himself in front of the dandy, "whar are ye frum?"

"Bawston is my native city," was the reply, as the little fop lifted his head a trifle proudly.

"The Dickens! Ye don't say!" ejaculated the judge, as if greatly astonished. "Waal, now, Boston must be quite er town—most as big as this hyer place, eh?"

The stranger almost smiled.

"Well—aw—it is very neah as large," he admitted.

"How'd ye happen ter cum out hyer?" pursued the inquisitive judge.

"I came to see the countwy, ye know."

"Ah, exactly! I hope it fully meets yer anticipations. You are not disappointed?"

The dude hesitated.

"Yes, I am somewhat," he finally confessed.

"You are?" thundered the judge, scowling blackly. "W'at's ther matter with ther kentry?"

"Ob, well—er—that is—nothing," faltered the dandy, trembling visibly and glancing around. "The countwy is all wight—it is the people, ye know."

The judge seemed to grow still more furious.

"Ther people!" he roared. "W'at's ther matter with them?"

"I find that they—aw—lack something."

"Lack somethin'—w'at?"

"Bwains," was the astounding reply.

For a moment dead silence ensued, then the woolly-headed man squealed:

"Whoopie! Score one fer ther velvet tenderfut! Go bag yer head, Ole Wobblejaw!"

Then a scene of wild confusion followed. Some laughed, some were angry, and every one tried to talk at once. A few, whom liquor had made decidedly ugly, drew their weapons and tried to crowd nearer the rash dandy.

"Shoot him!" yelled one.

Then some one emptied a six-shooter into the floor.

"For Heaven's sake, gentlemen," gasped the velvet dandy, "what have I done to arouse your anger? I am suah—"

But his voice was drowned by the tumult.

Mr. Wagg looked alarmed.

"Ther durned critters may take it into their heads ter lynch ther posy," he muttered. "They're in an ugly condishun. By gum! There's goin' ter be er sarcus!"

The woolly-headed man was right. The men of Jacktown felt themselves insulted.

"Let me git at 'im!" howled Tiger Joe, as he pushed forward with clinched fists. "I'll chaw 'im up! Cl'ar ther track!"

But Blizzard Ben caught the little fire-eater by the collar.

"Hole on, Joe," he commanded. "Ther tenderfut has 'sulted ther hull camp. He's got ter 'polergize ter ther crowd, ur settle wi' me."

"Silence in ther court!" bellowed Blowbugle.

After a time, silence was restored. Then the judge turned and faced the stranger, throwing back his shoulders and glaring straight at the cowering tenderfoot.

"Young man," he said, impressively, "you hav' 'sulted ther people of this great an' geelorious kentry, an' you must 'polergize to ther citizens uv Jacktown."

"What have I done?" stammered the dandy.

"Oh, heavens! what a dweadful place this is!"

"Done?" thundered the judge. "Didn't ye say as how we lacked brains—hey?"

"Yes; but weally—"

"Thar hain't no weally 'bout hit. Do ye 'polergize?"

"Why, surely, I haven't—"

"Stan' back, jedge!" commanded the Blizzard. "I'll bring 'im ter law in double-quick time."

Then the bully seized the velvet dandy by the collar and dragged him through the crowd toward the bar.

"Cl'ar ther track!" he commanded. "We'll see ef ther dood 'll 'polergize fer thet insult. Make way ter ther bar!"

A moment later the bully of Jacktown lifted the tenderfoot from the floor and stood him up on the bar.

"Now we'll see if ther galoot 'll 'polergize," said Ben, as he faced the crowd for a moment, at the same time drawing a revolver.

But, apparently with the intention of making a break for the open door, the dandy sprang from the bar. He landed on Blizzard Ben's shoulders, fairly astride the bully's neck.

CHAPTER IV.

A BLIZZARD IN MINIATURE.

BLIZZARD BEN uttered a shout of amazement, and came near pitching forward upon his face as he felt the full weight of the velvet dandy upon his shoulders. In his surprise he dropped his revolver, at the same time lunging forward several steps. The dandy quickly locked his feet and grasped the bully's long hair, in order to keep from falling.

"Oh, gracious!" gasped the tenderfoot, who appeared almost overcome with terror.

"Jeehocus!" snorted the woolly-headed man.

"Looker thar, now! Beauty an' ther beast! Say, pard tenderfoot, how d'ye like ridin' er jackass?"

Blizzard Ben uttered a howl.

"Let go my ba'r!" he bellowed. "Holy poker! You'll hav' mer hull skulp in er jiffy."

The crowd seemed to catch the comical view of the situation, and nearly every man burst into a roar of laughter.

"Dump 'im Ben!" shouted one. "'Fore I'd be taken fer a boss!"

"Help!" cried the dandy faintly. "Let me—aw—descend."

"Durn ye! I'll break yer dinged neck!" snarled the bully.

But Ben found it difficult to dodge the little man, who was evidently afraid of hurting himself by a fall. Suddenly the dandy seemed to lose his hold and topple backward, uttering a cry of terror. Just how it happened no one could tell, but the little man appeared to turn a complete back-somerset and alight upon his feet, with his tall beaver in his hand.

"Hoppin' hemlock!" cried Erastus Wagg. "Did ye ketch outer that leetle trick? Hanged ef he hain't goin' ter pass roun' ther hat!"

But the velvet dandy was, seemingly, as badly frightened as ever.

"Will some one show me—aw—the way out of heah?" he entreated. "I wish to gracious I had nevah left Bawston!"

Blizzard Ben wheeled and faced the trembling dandy. There was a terrible look of rage on the bully's countenance.

"So ye straddled mer neck, did ye?" he snarled, showing his wolfish teeth. "Durn yer hide! I'm goin' ter paralyze ye fer thet."

The tenderfoot retreated, extending his hand appealingly.

"Pway don't!" he gasped. "I asuah you it was quite unintentional—weally it was!"

The crowd surged forward to see the sport.

"Go fer 'im, Ben!" cried one.

"Give ther dood er show!" shouted another.

"For heaven's sake, haven't I a friend in the place?" wailed the little man.

"Bet yer, boots!" shouted the woolly-headed man. "I'm reddy ter stan' ter yer back's long's it's safe, an' my name's Wagg!"

"I'll settle with you w'en I'm done with ther dood," observed the bully, scowling at the tramp.

"Don't be in er hurry 'bout settlin'; I'm willin' ter give ye thirty days," grinned Erastus.

Once more Ben faced the little man who wore the violets.

"You've got ter fight me," declared the big bully, scowling blackly.

"Good gwacious! I cawn't!" wailed the tenderfoot, his teeth chattering with presumed terror. "I nevah did such a—aw—beastly thing in my life—weally I nevah!"

"Then it's time ye began."

"Brace up ter 'im, Sweet Violets!" chipped in Mr. Wagg. "I'm reddy ter bet all mer wealth thet you kin smooch 'im. I've seen leetle cusses like you afore."

At this moment a tall, rather handsome, yet sinister-appearing man pushed his way through the crowd.

It was Dandy Dirk.

"What's the row here?" he demanded.

The velvet dandy surveyed the proprietor of the Silver Bell sharply. A light of satisfaction seemed to flash in the little fellow's eyes. Had he recognized Dandy Dirk? If so, it was quite certain that the Hercules did not recognize him in turn.

Dandy Dirk was the only man in Jacktown whom Blizzard Ben feared. The handsome owner of the Silver Bell was, in fact, the best man in the camp with cards, fists or pistols. The Blizzard only held the position of chief by the consent of Dandy Dirk, and it was said that the bully was ready to do any piece of "unpleasant work" which his master commanded.

In haste Ben explained the situation. Of course he made the tenderfoot's words and actions appear as insulting as possible.

Dandy listened until Bill had finished, then he surveyed the velvet fop with ill-concealed contempt.

"And this is the *thing* that thought Western people lacked brains, is it?" he inquired, sneeringly.

"Ther very thing," declared Ben.

"And you wanted to fight with it? Ben, I am ashamed of you!"

The bully hung his head.

"I'm er leetle 'shamed merself, boss," he admitted. "But I waz r'iled. All I ax is ther permit ter spank it once."

"Well, spank it easy, Ben," laughed Dandy.

"I'll make 'im think o' his mammy!" grinned the bully, as he spit on his hands. "Whoop! Hyer goes!"

Ben made a rush for the trembling Dandy, who turned and ran around the small ring made by the interested spectators, crying shrilly:

"Help! help! Oh, gwacious! I'm murdered!"

Just as the bully's hand touched the terrified tenderfoot's shoulder, the latter wheeled and

clinched his pursuer. Then ensued an amazing scene. For an instant there was a fierce struggle, following which both men appeared to sink toward the floor. Then a wild yell of astonishment went up from the astounded spectators.

The velvet dandy had sunk upon one knee, and, in some astonishing manner, had thrown Blizzard Ben across the other, face downward. Then the little man's hand rose and fell, and the bully was the one who received the spanking, every blow being delivered with the full force of the dandy's strength.

"Whoopee!" squealed Erastus Wagg, dancing up and down in his excitement and delight. "Didn't I tole ye! Baste 'im, Sweet Violets! Hain't thet deelightful! Oh, Moses! hain't this a jubilee!"

The bully uttered a roar of pain and rage, and succeeded in squirming out of the dandy's grasp. He rolled over and over upon the floor, and finally sat up to see the little man standing with his tall hat in his hand, carefully brushing it with a white silk handkerchief.

It is impossible to describe the amazement and excitement of the crowd. They could scarcely believe their eyes. It seemed impossible that the little man in velvet had really spanked the bully of Jacktown!

And probably no one was more astonished than Blizzard Ben himself.

"W'at's happened?" he mumbled. "Seem's like I felt suthin'."

"Guess it made ye think o' yer mammy," observed the irrepressible Wagg.

The Blizzard slowly arose to his feet, glaring steadily at the dandy.

"You've played it kinder slick," said the bully, slowly; "but you've got ter settle with me. I'm goin' ter wipe ye all over this hyer floor."

"Oh, don't, sir—please don't!" entreated the little man, swiftly tucking his handkerchief into a pocket and replacing the hat upon his head.

"I am weally frightened!"

"Let up on thet!" snorted the Blizzard. "I've tumbled to yer leetle racket; but ef you've cum in hyer ter buck erg'in' ther galoots o' Jacktown, ye'll find yer han's full. I'm goin' ter knock ther linin' out o' ye!"

Whereupon Ben threw off his coat and rolled up his sleeves, exposing a pair of brawny arms.

Dandy Dirk stood with his back against the bar, watching the scene with increasing interest.

"Come!" cried the bully, "strip, greeny. I'm comin' fer ye in erbout two jiffs."

"Weally, if I must, will some one hold my—aw—hat?"

"Hyer ye go!" cried Wagg, promptly. "I'll hole it wile ye down 'im. I'll bet two ter one on ther leetle galoot! Who takes me? Two ter one on Sweet Violets."

But no one paid any attention to the hilarious vagabond.

"Are ye reddy?" demanded Ben.

The velvet dandy nodded.

The bully, with a shout, charged upon his puny foe, determined to crush him at the start. But the little man was worse than a flea to catch. Round and round, here and there he dodged, and the heavy blows which Ben aimed at the dandy's face were wasted on the empty air.

"Fifty thousan' dollars on Sweet Violets!" bellowed Erastus. "Who takes me?"

Suddenly the Blizzard seemed to be struck by a blizzard in miniature. A perfect hailstorm of stinging blows descended upon his face and neck, while, right and left skipped the little tenderfoot, constantly changing his position.

"Ding ye!" snarled Ben. "Stan' still an' let me git er crack at ye!"

Suddenly a heavy blow behind the bully's ear, fairly knocked him off his feet. He struck the floor heavily, but sprung up instantly.

"Jeehocus!" shouted the woolly-headed man. "Wazn't thet beaucherful?"

Blizzard Ben saw the little dandy standing with folded arms and a quiet smile on his face. The sight made the ruffian fairly furious. With a hoarse shout, he again charged on his insignificant-appearing foe.

Down went the velvet dandy's head, and the bully's rush carried him fairly astride the little man's neck. The next instant the tenderfoot shot upward, and Blizzard Ben was hurled headlong to the floor. The unlucky man struck upon his head and shoulders, and lay quite still.

"Good Lawd!" gasped the woolly-headed man. "Broke his neck, or I'm er Chinaman!"

CHAPTER V.

A MEETING IN JASPER CITY.

FLUSHED with triumph, the men of Jasper City rode homeward with Laughing Lu mount-

ed on a handsome black horse in their midst. Judge Blowbugle spoke the truth when he said that the smooth-spoken committee had pictured Jacktown and its inhabitants in no enviable light. Indeed, they had caused the girl to believe that the camp in Paradise Gulch was a perfect nest of law-breakers, horse-thieves and cut-throats. The Silver Bell Hotel, they declared, was simply a gambling-hell and drinking-hole, the name "hotel" being given it to disguise its true character from strangers. Every lawless character for miles around, when pursued by officers, fled to Jacktown, and was protected by the scoundrels of the place.

When Laughing Lu protested that she had seen nothing unusual in the appearance of the citizens of Jacktown, the committee argued that they were sly and crafty, and had evidently done their best to conceal the real character of the town from her eyes. The Jacktownites could not long keep their evil natures in subjection, and while she remained there the danger of insult or injury was on the increase.

Jasper City they painted in glowing colors. Its citizens were all peaceable and law-abiding, and many ladies dwelt there. In Jacktown Lu was obliged to stop beneath the roof of a gambling dive; in Jasper City she would be given an entire cabin to herself. The cabin would be furnished as well as Jasper could afford, and while she remained there, no rent would be charged. They paid her beauty a delicate compliment, and led her to understand that they should consider it a great favor to have as a resident the handsomest lady in the country. Among them she should be a veritable queen, and her slightest wish should be regarded as law.

Thus, by misrepresenting both Jacktown and Jasper City, they succeeded in inducing her to leave the former, as it made little difference where she was, so that she could watch for the appearance of her brother.

Great was the excitement when the citizens of Jasper City who had remained at home saw the "delegation" returning with the handsome girl, mounted on the black horse, riding by High Card Harry's side, at their head. Men, women and children turned out to obtain a view of her, and wild cheers greeted her entrance into the town.

Straight to the cabin which had been chosen for her abode and prepared for her the triumphant crowd made its way, those who were mounted being closely followed by those on foot.

Among the citizens of Jasper City who had not accompanied the "delegation" to Jacktown was a tall, handsome young man of about twenty-one. He gave his name as Ned Morris, and among the better class of Jasper City he had many friends, for he was a square, manly young fellow.

When Ned saw Laughing Lu's face, he uttered a stifled cry of amazement and staggered as if struck a heavy blow.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "She here! What can it mean?"

Like one in a dream, yet with his heart pounding fiercely in his bosom, he followed the crowd toward the cabin which had been chosen for Laughing Lu's home.

Fortunately the beautiful girl did not see the youth amid the crowd, for she might have done something which would have excited the curiosity of the spectators.

When the cabin, which stood on the outskirts of the camp, was reached, High Card Harry sprang down and assisted Luona to dismount. Then the gallant sport opened the door and ushered her into the little dwelling.

A cry of surprise and delight broke from the girl's lips as she saw the interior. It was divided into two rooms, the first being a combined sitting-room, parlor and bedroom. There was a pretty carpet on the floor and curtains concealed the rough walls. The board ceiling was neatly whitewashed. Against the curtained walls hung several really pretty pictures. The furniture was more pretentious than is often seen in a rough mining-camp. There were several chairs, one being an upholstered easy rocker. In one corner was a damask-covered sofa, upon which lay a guitar and some music. In the center of the room stood a small table, upon which were several books. Spotless white double curtains hung at the windows. Some parted curtains revealed a glimpse of a snowy-white bed.

"Oh, isn't it splendid!" cried Lu, in delight. "Beautiful! Why, it seems almost like a room at home!"

High Card Harry smiled with satisfaction.

"That door leads into the kitchen and cook-

room," he said. "You will find things there quite as well arranged as they are here."

"And whom shall I thank for all this?"

"No one. The entire town of Jasper united in preparing this place, and our only regret is that it is not more suitable for its new occupant."

She appeared somewhat confused.

"They shall be paid for their kindness," she declared; "and I will thank them for being so thoughtful."

"They ask no thanks," said the sport; "and as for taking pay, there is no one who will accept a cent. As long as you desire to remain here, these things are yours. Although Jasper is heaven compared with Jacktown, there are rough men in this camp. But even the rudest has a warm spot in his heart for every true woman. Jasper will be proud to say that the queen of the camp is the handsomest woman in the State."

She put out one hand protestingly, a reproachful smile on her face.

"Don't!" she exclaimed, and then checked herself, refraining with difficulty from telling him that his flattery was too open for good taste.

Outside the cabin the crowd waited impatiently for High Card Harry to reappear. He finally came out, but the beautiful girl preceded him.

"Fellow-citizens," cried the sport, "Miss Howard would like to speak to you."

Instantly silence reigned.

Finding herself the target of scores of eyes, Laughing Lu blushed and seemed a trifle confused, but this only heightened her charming appearance. More than one rough fellow's heart leaped wildly as he stared at that beautiful form and face, and more than one were ready to swear that she was the handsomest creature the sun ever shone upon.

"My dear friends," began the girl, hesitatingly, "I know not how to thank you for your kindness. Words cannot express my surprise and delight on seeing the interior of this charming little cottage. You have been very thoughtful, and you all have a share of my gratitude. I can say no more."

"Great Moses, that's ernuff!" blurted one rough fellow. "I feel now like I c'd walk on air an' not hafe try."

"Pards," cried High Card Harry, "I propose three cheers for the Queen of Jasper."

Then the whole crowd came near splitting their throats. Not knowing what else to do, Laughing Lu bowed her thanks and retreated into the cabin.

High Card Harry spoke a few low, sharp words, and the throng rapidly dispersed.

An hour later Ned Morris approached Laughing Lu's cabin and knocked lightly on the door. The girl soon appeared.

"Ned!" she almost shrieked, as she saw his face. "Is it you?"

Hat in hand, he bowed respectfully.

"Where did you come from?" she cried, a glad light in her blue eyes. "Is it really you? I can scarcely believe my eyes!"

Then, before he could reply, she seized him by the arm and drew him into the cabin, closing the door behind him.

"I am so glad to see you!" she murmured, betwixt laughter and tears.

"Are you really glad, Lu?" he asked, his voice trembling a little, despite his attempt to prevent.

"Yes; really and truly," she murmured, her eyes falling before his steady gaze.

For a moment both were silent, then she came toward him, holding out her hands.

"Ned," she faltered, "I was wrong. Forgive me."

He caught her hands with both his own, a gasp of joy escaping his lips.

"I was wrong as well!" he exclaimed. "It is I who should be forgiven!"

"No—no! Do not attempt to take any of the blame upon yourself!" she entreated. "I alone was to blame. I never cared a fig for—for him, and it was cruel in me to try to make you think I did."

"Truly you did not care for Harold Manson?"

"Truly, Ned."

Then he caught her in his arms and kissed her, and the misunderstanding which had separated them a year before was settled.

For a few moments the joy of the young lovers at having met and come to an understanding was too great for words; but their eyes told each other the tale which their lips could not speak.

Finally Ned led her to the little sofa, and they sat down together.

"I could not believe my eyes when I saw you

in the midst of the crowd returning from Jacktown," he declared. "So you are the wonderfully handsome girl of whom we have heard so much?"

"And I could not believe my eyes when I saw you at the door, a moment ago. How came you here, Ned?"

"I came West immediately after our misunderstanding. I resolved to make a fortune somehow, and return as rich as Harold Manson."

"Rich or poor, you are more to me than a million Harold Mansons!" was her earnest declaration.

He drew her toward him and kissed her again.

"And you are more than all the world to me," he murmured.

For several moments they were silent—that sweet silence so dear to lovers.

"But how came you here alone in this wild country?" he finally inquired, "When I left you, you were at Ashton in school."

"I am searching for my brother," she replied.

"Your brother?" he exclaimed, in amazement. "I thought he was employed in the Burton Bank."

"So he was until a few months ago, when the bank was robbed. There was a terrible time about the robbery, and Philip was accused of having a hand in it. They even shut him in prison, but he escaped and fled. No one knew whither he went, but some time ago I received a letter from him, saying that he was all right. The postmark was either Col. or Cal.; but I could not tell which. Then I resolved to find him. That is why I am here."

Ned Morris looked amazed and alarmed.

"This is most astounding news!" he cried. "I never met your brother, but you have told me of him a score of times, and knowing his sister as I do, I am willing to wager my life that he is no thief."

"Thank you, Ned, for your confidence!" she exclaimed. "I am glad that some one besides myself believes in him."

"But," continued the young man, "I am afraid he did a foolish thing in writing to you, and that you made a mistake in coming here in search for him."

"Why—how?" she cried.

"As he is charged with robbery, it is quite probable that you have been constantly watched by detectives. That letter, in all likelihood, did not reach your hands without being inspected. If so, you have been followed and, should you find your brother, he might be arrested before your very eyes."

A cry of terror broke from her lips, and she clung convulsively to his arm.

"Oh, Ned! can it be as bad as that?"

He looked into her fear-stricken face and saw that he had made a mistake in speaking so hastily. With a few brief words, he tried to soothe her fears and reassure her.

"It may not be so bad," he confessed. "We will hope it is not. Have you plenty of money?"

"Yes. You know papa left us nearly ten thousand—a small fortune for each. My share was deposited subject to my order. I have made a big inroad upon it while attending school, but still have plenty left."

"That is good. Now let me warn you to beware of any one who may attempt to question you closely. Tell no one of your brother. Do not make many intimate friends in this camp, for Jasper City is far from a Paradise. To tell the honest truth, there are more hard characters in this camp than in any other two Western towns I ever saw."

"But they told me that it was a splendid place, and that Jacktown's inhabitants were all bad men."

"Then they deceived you," said the young man, quietly. "There are ten bad men in Jasper to every one in Jacktown. But, above all others, beware of that two-faced villain and gambler, High Card Harry."

The lovers conversed a few minutes longer, then Ned arose to depart. Luona made him promise to come and see her as often as discreet, and then, with a parting kiss, he left her.

As he walked briskly away into Jasper City, he did not see the pale, handsome, sinister face that scowled upon him from behind a huge boulder, or hear High Card Harry's fierce words:

"So, she has found a lover thus soon! But, I have seen her, and fallen madly in love with the peerless creature. She shall be mine—I swear it! No power of Heaven or earth shall stand between us! Woe to the man who gets in my path!"

CHAPTER VI.

TROUBLE BREWING FOR JACKTOWN.

LATE that afternoon, Laughing Lu had a visitor. When she answered the knock on the door, she was surprised to see a little round-shouldered, seedy-looking old fellow, who wore a huge pair of spectacles.

"Good-afternoon, miss," said the stranger in a peculiar, rasping voice, removing his hat and ducking his head two or three times. "May I come in a moment? I wish to speak with you of an important matter."

Before she could decide whether to admit him or not, he pushed forward and entered. Lu was a little frightened by his queer actions, but he hastened to reassure her.

"Don't be frightened, miss," he entreated, lowering his unpleasant voice somewhat. "Have you heard the latest news concerning your brother?"

The question was asked rather abruptly, and startled the girl.

"No!" she cried. "What is it?"

Then you have not heard anything of him since coming West?" and the stranger seemed to peer sharply through his spectacles at her.

"Not a word," she replied. "Can you tell me anything of him? Do you bring me news?"

"Well, he hasn't been captured yet," was the guarded reply.

"Is that all you can tell me?" demanded the girl, beginning to suspect that the spectacled stranger might be a foe. "I did not know but you brought a message direct from him."

The man shook his head.

"Fact is, I don't know where he is," he admitted. "Do you?"

But, Luona was on her guard now. She would answer no more questions for the stranger.

"You seem to take quite an interest in my brother, sir," she said, sharply. "Have you business with him?"

The spectacled stranger seemed a bit confused by her sudden change of demeanor.

"Well—ahem!—no, not exactly," he stammered. "But I may have."

The girl shivered, for she fancied that she knew quite well what that business would be.

"What is your name and your business?" asked Luona, quietly.

"My name?" exclaimed the little man, as he searched hastily through his pockets. "Business! Why, I'm a life-insurance agent. I can give you a policy from one to twenty. Name? Good gracious! I ought to have a card here."

But, after feeling through every pocket two or three times, he came to the conclusion that he had left his cards somewhere.

"My name is Solomon Snide," he asserted. "I represent the great Ketchfast and Skinem Death and Accident Endowment Society, surplus capital two hundred thousand dollars. The solidest company in the world."

"I suppose that you are seeking my brother in order to insure him?" suggested Lu, sarcastically.

"Well, no—that is, not exactly," faltered Mr. Snide. "You see, my business took me to these parts, and I thought I would inquire about the young man."

"Very thoughtful of you, Mr. Solomon Snide," smiled the girl, as she opened the cabin door. "Do you suppose you can find the way out of this cabin without assistance?"

Solomon looked surprised, but instantly took the broad hint.

"Oh, certainly, certainly," he nodded, "no trouble about that. I guess I will be going. A very pleasant call—very pleasant, indeed."

In the doorway he paused to make a parting bow.

"Give my respects to your brother when you meet him," he said, his rasping voice jarring unpleasantly on the girl's nerves, and causing her to shiver a bit. "I bid you good-day."

She watched him as he walked briskly away into the camp, a troubled light in her eyes.

"He is a detective, I am sure," she murmured. "Ned was right—I have been followed. They are determined to recapture poor Philip, and carry him back to prison, yet I am positive that my brother never committed that robbery. His prospects in life were too good for him to blight them by such a foolish act. Yet with his own lips he declared that he committed the robbery! I did not tell Ned that—I dared not. It might have made him doubt Philip's honesty. But I fancy I know why he did so strange an act. He was madly in love with Ione Wilson, and suspicion pointed toward her father as the perpetrator of the crime. Mr. Wilson, the bank president, was arrested—then Philip resolved to

sacrifice himself to save his sweetheart from shame. 'Twas a foolish thing to do.

"That man with the round shoulders and unpleasant voice is a human sleuth-hound, bent on hunting my brother down. His pretension of being an insurance agent was very transparent, and his excuses for inquiring concerning Philip were lame and shallow. He took me by surprise at first, but I do not fancy that he learned much that will aid him. I must be constantly on my guard."

Laughing Lu watched the sun sink behind the western range, and the shadows gather in the valley and creep up the mountain-sides. When the shadows grew to darkness, she closed and fastened the cabin door. Then she lighted a lamp and examined the window fastenings, which she found all right. To her surprise and joy, she discovered that one window could be opened a short distance, and fastened securely in that position, thus admitting fresh air without in any way increasing her danger.

The brave girl spent a restless night, and was glad when morning broke. She went out for an early walk, and when she returned an hour later, she felt much refreshed.

Near the middle of the forenoon Ned Morris appeared. His face wore a troubled look.

"Oh, Ned, I am glad you have come!" cried Lu. "I have something to tell you."

He came in and threw himself into a chair. Luona sat down and at once told him of the visit of Solomon Snide. When she had finished, Ned said:

"Yes, I noticed the queer old spectacled chap in camp, and wondered who he was. From what you say, it is evident that he is surely a detective. You must be on your guard, Lu."

"I will be, Ned, and I hope and pray that Philip may escape arrest until the charge against him is proven false."

"I hope so, too. But I have come here to tell you that there is trouble brewing in camp, and to warn you to keep close to this cabin to-day."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, to tell the truth, the roughs and toughs are in possession of the camp. Some of them were filling up with bad liquor the greater part of the night and only got sleep enough to put them in bad humor to-day. Thus far, remembering your presence, High Card Harry and Hickory Jimmy have kept them quiet, but there is bound to be an outbreak before the day is over, and a bad one, if I am not mistaken."

"Oh, what will they do?" cried Lu, in fear.

"It is hard to tell. Just now their attention seems to be directed toward Jacktown, and they threaten to clean out that camp and burn every building to the ground before sundown. They may do it, too!"

The girl was speechless with surprise. After a time, she faltered:

"Surely they will not dare."

"That gang will dare anything when filled with bad liquor. If they start for Jacktown, the citizens of that place must be warned, for blood is sure to flow. There are good men in Jacktown, and it would be a shame for them to lose their lives through lack of a warning to look out for the ruffians of Jasper."

After ten or fifteen minutes more of conversation the young man departed, promising to return ere night and let her know how matters went within the camp.

A short time after Ned's departure, a wild yell and a pistol-shot came from the heart of the camp. Several minutes of silence followed, and then the listening girl heard a volley of shots and a chorus of cries.

The mob had got beyond High Card Harry's and Hickory Jimmy's control.

During the rest of the forenoon Laughing Lu heard shots and yells at irregular intervals.

Midday was past when the tumult in the camp reached the highest point. Fusilades of pistol-shots were followed by whoops and shouts. Luona listened, her face white with alarm. She fancied the sounds were receding.

Suddenly a powerful horse dashed up to the cabin door. Ned Morris was on the animal's back.

"Lu!" he cried. "Come here a moment."

She came out quickly.

"What is it, Ned?" she asked.

"The Old Boy's to pay!" he replied. "The roughs are mounted and have started for Jacktown. They swear to lay the town in ashes and shoot every person who dares resist. Jacktown must be warned—it would be almost as bad as murder not to tell them of their danger. I am going to warn them."

"You?" she gasped.

"Yes, I know a short cut by which I can get in ahead of the mob. I can do it all right,

never fear. Keep close to the cabin while I am away. Good-by, darling."

A wave of his hand, a shout, a clatter of hoofs and he was away, sweeping like a whirlwind into the hills toward Jacktown.

CHAPTER VII.

A GAME OF DRAW POKER.

WITHIN the saloon of the Silver Bell Hotel dead silence followed the camp tramp's startling words. Blizzard Ben lay quite still where he had fallen, and the amazed spectators fairly held their breath as they stared at the victor.

Had the little, drawing, insignificant-appearing fop really "downed" the bully of Jacktown? They could not believe the evidence of their eyes.

The man in velvet stood with his hands on his hips, gazing at the fallen tough as if amazed that he did not arise and renew the battle.

A hard look swept over Dandy Dirk's face as he surveyed the dude. He realized that he had made a big mistake in deciding that the little man was a cowardly creature, without a spark of genuine grit about him. The dandy's apparent fright he now realized was assumed, and now believed that the much-dressed stranger had entered the Silver Bell with the intention of pitting his skill against the good men of the camp. A scowl settled on Dandy's face, for he knew that, when Blizzard Ben fell, the citizens would look to him to support the honor of Jacktown. He would be forced to overcome the stranger, in some way.

As soon as the crowd fully grasped the situation, a great uproar arose. Every one uttered a shout, but above all the rest could be heard the voice of the eccentric Wagg.

"Whoop!" he yelled, shrilly. "Three cheers an' er youp fur Sweet Violets! I knowed he'd do it! He's the bloomin' lily o' ther valley w'at kin knock ther spots offen yer common hot-house geraniums! I'm bettin' mer wealth onter his head every time, an' my name's Wagg!"

Dandy Dirk stepped forward and knelt beside the unlucky bully. A hasty examination convinced the proprietor of the Silver Bell that Blizzard Ben was not seriously injured, then he sprang up, motioning for silence.

"He is all right," Dandy announced, as soon as he could make himself heard; "or will be, in a short time. The fall sent his senses wool-gathering. He probably was not expecting his antagonist to attempt to escape him by dodging between his legs like a cowardly cur."

Dandy stared straight at the man in velvet as he spoke, but the tenderfoot did not appear to notice the insulting words. He received his hat from the woolly-headed man, uttering a low word of thanks as he did so.

Blowbugle pressed forward, extending his hand to the stranger.

"Sir, we welcome you ter Jacktown," cried the judge, with a flourish. "You have shown that you are able ter look out fer number one, an' that is ther kind uv men we're lookin' fer jest now. W'at might we call yer name?"

The stranger touched the judge's hand, and replied, his voice quite free from the affected drawl:

"In Bitter Root Bend, the place where I last stopped, they called me Violet Vane. My name is Charlie Vane, but I have a habit of wearing fresh violets when I can obtain them, and artificial ones when no others are to be had. For that reason the men of Bitter Root Bend took a fancy to call me Violet Vane."

"Hooraw fur Violet Vane!" roared Erastus Wagg.

The crowd seemed suddenly seized by enthusiasm, and uttered a suppressed cheer. Dandy Dirk turned crimson, and strode forward to confront the fop.

"Sir," said the proprietor of the Silver Bell, in a cold, hard tone, "are we to understand that you come into this town to set yourself up as a chief?"

The little man smiled quietly.

"With the pasteboards only," he replied. "I try to avoid a brawl whenever I can. When forced into one, I do my level best to hold up my end."

"Then you pretend to play cards?"

"A little."

"I suppose you came here with the intention of cleaning out the sports of the camp?" sneered Dandy.

"Well, I thought I would try them a whirl," was the calm reply.

There was something in the velvet dandy's manner that caused the blood to leap quicker in the veins of the handsome man who faced him. Indeed, the proprietor of the Silver Bell could scarcely refrain from striking Vane's smiling

face. But Dandy held his temper, and bided his time. He was a skillful gambler, and felt confident that he could teach this insignificant fop a thing or two.

"I will be a first-rate subject to begin upon," he remarked, grimly. "The boys seem to think that I can play a little."

The velvet tenderfoot seemed pleased at the prospect, and arrangements were swiftly made for the game.

The unconscious bully was lifted and carried from the room, Dandy giving orders that he should be restored to consciousness and carefully attended to.

A few minutes later the tenderfoot sport and the handsome, dark-faced proprietor of the Silver Bell sat down to match skill and fortune. Dandy produced a fresh pack and broke the seal.

"What shall the limit be?" asked Vane.

"Limit!" sneered Dandy Dirk. "Are you going to play with a limit? Is penny-ante the game you are looking for?"

The little man smiled as serenely as ever.

"I am a stranger in this place, and therefore unable to borrow enough to call a high bet should it exceed my pile. To set a reasonable limit will be simply giving me a fair show."

"Oh, well then, name the limit," said the Dandy, shortly.

"How will a thousand do, with five for the ante?"

"It will suit me, if it does you," asserted the proprietor, opening his eyes a little and staring hard at the dude gamester.

"That settles it then."

They cut and the deal fell to Dandy. The little sport produced a roll of bills that made his opponent's eyes glisten.

"By gum! he's got ther dosh!" hoarsely whispered the woolly-headed man.

Before throwing the cards, Dandy produced a heavy revolver and laid it on the table. He said not a word, but the action was significant enough for the little man to understand his meaning. Vane seemingly took no notice of the act, and as he made no move to produce a weapon, many believed that he was not "heeled."

The game began, and the crowd watched with intense interest. At first the luck varied, but, after a few minutes, it seemed to turn in Dandy Dirk's direction, and for almost half an hour he took two-thirds of the pots.

Vane did not lose his nerve in the least. He played on calmly, even smiling easily as his antagonist raked in the money. He was watching Dandy's style of playing, and soon discovered that the proprietor of the Silver Bell was a great hand to bluff.

"Bah!" cried Dirk, at last. "This is the tamest kind of a game! I am tired of pulling your money across the board. Stranger, you can't play a little bit!"

At which Vane's eyes twinkled.

"My friend," he said, quietly, "when you count your money you will find yourself not so very much ahead. True, you have taken a majority of the pots, but they have all been small ones. Those which have been of any great value have come to this side."

"My winnings would have been larger but for this cursed limit," growled the tall gambler.

"Think so? Well, then, we will raise the limit. How will ten ante and five thousand limit suit?"

"That is better."

"All right, we will call it that."

And the game continued.

For a time luck fluctuated, but finally Dandy opened a big jack-pot on two small pairs. He opened it for a heavy sum. Vane "stayed," and drew four cards. Dandy took one, that did not better his hand, yet he promptly bet five hundred dollars. The velvet gamester counted out five hundred, and seemed to hesitate whether to "raise" or "call." Finally he raised the pot a hundred dollars.

"He has a weak hand," thought Dandy. "I can drive him out."

Then he raised the pot two thousand dollars. The little man laid his cards face down upon the table and coolly counted out seven thousand dollars, raising Dandy the full limit.

With a fierce curse Dandy flung down his hand, at the same time saying:

"You must have a fist-full. I will give fifty dollars to see your cards, but five thousand is too much."

"You are welcome to see them for nothing, if you pass."

"Well, I do pass."

Then Vane turned his cards face upward and exposed a pair of four-spots, with a king, ten and six following.

Dandy Dirk uttered a hoarse shout of fury, and seized the money, exclaiming:

"I'll be blown if you can beat me like that!"

Like a flash a derringer leaped into Vane's hand, and, as he shoved it against Dandy's forehead, he said coldly:

"Hands off, or I will let daylight shine through your cabeza!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BEST MAN IN JACKTOWN.

WHERE the weapon in the Velvet Sport's hand had come from no one could tell. His hand had not descended below the level of the table, nor had he drawn the derringer from his bosom. It seemed to have sprung into his hand at the command of his will.

Steadily the little man gazed straight into Dandy Dirk's eyes in a manner that made the dark-faced gambler quail despite himself. Dandy's revolver lay close at hand, but he felt that to attempt to grasp it would cause the little sport to send a bullet crashing through his skull. There was a look in the dude sport's eyes that said "shoot" as plain as words.

"Hands off that money!" repeated the Velvet Sport, sternly.

The proprietor of the Silver Bell was forced to obey, uttering a vicious curse as he did so.

"I will have your life for this!" he snarled.

"You may have my life—if you can take it," retorted the little sport quietly. "But you cannot have one cent of this money, which I honestly and fairly won."

"By bluff—"

"Your own game," interrupted Vane, as he gathered up the bills with his left hand and thrust them into his pocket, keeping Dandy covered all the time.

Dandy almost frothed in his fury, but the man in velvet did not appear a bit alarmed. Indeed, he seemed amused.

Erastus Wagg was delighted.

"Whoopee," he cried. "I knowed 'twu'd end this way! I'll bet on Sweet Violets, every time! He's full o' sand from the groun' up. Ef Jacktown wants er champion, ther posy in velvet's ther man. He kin wipe out ther big men o' Jasper single-handed."

The crimson flush of rage left Dandy Dirk's swarthy face as he heard these words; he became almost ghastly white, and appeared more dangerous than before. His eyes seemed to fairly blaze.

"This insignificant puppy has not yet conquered the best men of this camp," hissed the proprietor of the Silver Bell, in a low, distinct tone. "He got the best of Blizzard Ben through an accident, but he will not be so fortunate next time. He has beaten me out of some money, but I mean to take satisfaction out of his hide."

Dandy's friends, and those who stood in fear of him, uttered a faint cheer. The tall gambler wielded considerable power in Jacktown, and had he given the signal a dozen of his allies would have attempted to "snuff out" the Velvet Sport ere that individual left the room. But Dandy saw that Vane had made friends and admirers since entering that room, and the wily gambler refrained from giving the signal.

The tenderfoot laughed easily.

"Partner," he said, "I have won your money, and am bound to give you satisfaction some way. How will you have it?"

Vane had lowered the hand which held the derringer, but he was ready to use the weapon in an instant, should Dandy make a treacherous move.

"Do you dare stand up before me as you did with Blizzard Ben?" demanded the Hercules.

"Dare? I am afraid to meet no man on equal terms," was the reply, calmly spoken.

"Hooraw! I knowed it!" shouted Wagg. "Hain't he er Jim-dandy?"

Dirk arose to his feet, throwing off his coat and making other preparations for a fistic encounter. Once more the crowd became wild with excitement, and bets were freely offered that the proprietor of the Silver Bell would crush his antagonist. With the exception of Erastus Wagg, Violet Vane's friends dared risk nothing on the little Sport's head, and although Wagg had nothing to venture, he made an unlimited amount of talk.

Blowbugle shook his head sagely, but was too wise to express his belief of the result. The judge was pretty sure to cheer the victor and drink to his success, whichever way the battle went.

Vane arose to his feet and buttoned his black velvet coat tightly around him. His hat he placed on the table.

"Whoop!" cried the tramp Erastus, springing

upon the table, a long-barreled revolver in each hand. "Form er ring, ye starin' galoots! Hyer's fun by ther cartload! This is a great day fur ther race. I'm goin' ter overlook ther sarcus an' see fair play. Fu'st one as goes crooked 'll git er dose outer one o' these ante-mortem pill-dispensers an' system perforators. W'en one o' them implements o' war explodes, su'thin' generally drops."

In a few moments both Dandy Dirk and Violet Vane were ready for the conflict. As they faced each other in the center of the ring made by the spectators, Dandy said, with a sneer of triumph:

"I noticed that you were pretty handy with your dukes, but your blows are little worse than mosquito bites. You will not find me the kind of a man that Blizzard Ben is. He has plenty of strength, but no science. I have both, and I am going to give you the worst licking you ever got."

Violet Vane's reply was a smile.

A moment later the two were at it, sparring cautiously, watching each other closely. It soon became evident to the Velvet Sport that Dandy Dirk had spoken the truth when he laid claims to a certain amount of skill, but, despite his inferior size, Vane was a thorough master of the manly art. The dark gambler soon discovered this fact.

Vane decided to get in his work on Dandy's eyes first, and almost every telling blow was aimed for them. Here, there, round and round skipped the lithe and supple figure. At first Dandy thought to allow him to tire himself, in that way, but one or two stinging strokes under the ears and on the jaw caused him to change his mind. By-and-by Vane's fist caught Dandy in the left eye, and the big gambler came near going to the floor; at that, he lost his head and made a rush. As a result he caught a left-hander in the other eye, while instantly, Vane's right struck him a terrific whack under the chin, and down he dropped.

"Jeehocus!" shouted the woolly-headed man on the table; "hain't I glad I didn't run erg'in' thet 'Gyptian batterin'-ram! Say, mister, ef ye'll climb up here whar I am, I'll pick ye up."

Dandy lay still for a full minute, gasping and rubbing his throat, seeming dazed. As he lay there, he heard some one in the crowd cry:

"Where are the men who wanted to bet on Dandy Dick? I will go 'em two to one on the little man in velvet!"

With a hoarse cry Dandy struggled to his feet. His eyes were swelling rapidly, threatening to seriously injure his prospect of success, so he resolved to push the battle.

And he did push the battle for a few moments, giving the fisticuff expert about all he wanted to do to ward off the fast and furious blows. The proprietor of the Silver Bell believed that, if he could force his foe to a clinch, he would be able to down him, and might give him a hard fall that would end the struggle.

The result revealed his mistake.

Dandy seemed to suddenly get an advantageous hold on the Velvet Sport, and he strained every muscle to dash the little man to the floor. Both went down, but, strangely enough, when they struck, Violet Vane was uppermost, and in an instant on his feet again.

Another round followed, and this time Vane pressed the fighting. His opportunity came; he gave Dandy both fists, one on the jaw and the other under the ear, when the Hercules went down like an ox, and the fight was ended, for he was fairly knocked out.

When the result was made known, the crowd seemed to fairly go wild. Every man crowded forward, and tried to get hold of the victor's hand.

The champion had come!

"Hooraw fur ther best man in Jacktown!" bellowed Erastus Wagg, discharging both of his revolvers in a rapid and reckless manner.

And such a yell as went up had never before been heard in Jacktown.

CHAPTER IX.

A RECOGNITION.

DAVY HAWSER was urging his four-in-hand by whip and word, for he was slightly behind time and the old coach was lightly loaded. Indeed, it carried but two passengers that day, a man of fifty and a young lady of nineteen or twenty. Both rode within.

"A tenderfoot," was Davy's comment when he first saw the gentleman at Cold Water City; but, when the stage-driver's eyes rested on the face of the young lady who was following the Easterner, he could only gasp:

"Oh, my!"

That she was pretty any one would have ad-

mitted, and most men would have called her beautiful. She was a blonde, with sunny hair and laughing blue eyes. Her appearance was bright and lively, and when she spoke, a bewitching smile lingered on her face. Her lips were like the petals of a crimson rose, and there was a fascinating charm about her small, sweet mouth. She was a trifle below medium height, but her figure was round, graceful and perfectly built. She was attired in a plain and tasty traveling suit, which displayed the beauty of her contour fairly well.

The gentleman was of medium height, a trifle spare of flesh, and somewhat haggard and careworn in appearance. He wore a full iron-gray beard, which partially concealed the expression of his features, but it was evident that he had a high-bred sensitive face. His eyes were sharp, searching and steady. He wore a plain brown traveling suit, and nowhere about his person was there a display of jewelry.

Davy Hawser rightly concluded that the two were father and daughter.

"Goin' ter Jacktown," muttered Davy, when he learned their destination. "Wal, I reckon Laughin' Lu 'll hav' er rival. Sh'u'dn't wonder ef ther camp had er cupple o' queens afore long."

Davy did not know that Jasper City had robbed Jacktown of its queen the day before.

As the stage swayed and bounced over the uneven trail, the two passengers carried on a broken conversation.

"How much further into this wild country do you intend going, father?" asked the girl.

"I don't know, Ione," Owen Wilson replied.

"I am going to invest capital somewhere here in the West, and I have not yet found a place that suits me. There are plenty of sharks, I have discovered, who are ready to relieve a man of his wealth by selling him 'salted' mines, or something equally as worthless, but thus far I have failed to find a solid chance for a safe investment that was just to my liking."

"This is a wild, beautiful country!" exclaimed the girl. "There is a charm about it which attracts and pleases me."

Mr. Wilson gazed fondly at her and sighed.

"I fear you will find it monotonous in time. It seems a shame to take you from the bustle and stir of society and bury you in this strange land."

She laid her hand on his.

"You forget, father, that I was already an outcast from society," she said, softly.

"I forget it not," he responded, with bitterness in both face and voice. "I cannot forget that you were ostracized through no fault of mine, though the finger of scorn was pointed at my back. Gods! I wish I might forget my feelings when the bank directors hinted that I had better resign my position! I suffered more than death at that moment, and I have suffered since."

"Father!"

She said no more, but he felt the unspoken sympathy of her voice, touch and eyes. It seemed to hurt him.

"Don't, Ione!" he pleaded. "It is not for myself that I care so much, but you."

"And I have told you a hundred times that I do not care," she said. "No matter what the world may think, I know my father is not a criminal!"

It is impossible to describe the look he gave her.

"Ione," he cried, in a suppressed voice, "you are a noble girl! Day by day, you grow more and more like your angel mother. She was the best woman God's sun ever shone upon!"

"Dear mother!" breathed the girl, softly.

"But for all of your belief in me, it galls me to the quick to know that the world thinks me a thief. All my life I have been scrupulously honest, and never to my knowledge have I taken one cent that was not rightfully mine. And now, when I have reached the afternoon of life, my reputation is torn from me and my good name blackened at one foul blow. All my plans for your future have been dashed to the earth. I know not what lies before us."

"It will all come right in the end, father," she said, with the full faith of youth.

"God grant it may!" he murmured. "Your confidence is greater than mine. The very thing that should have cleared my name proved a terrible blow for you, but even that did not free me from the ban."

Something in her face caused him to cease speaking in an abrupt manner. He knew that he had approached dangerously near the one point upon which they could not agree. She firmly believed Philip Howard innocent, despite the fact that the young man himself had con-

fessed his guilt. He could not believe that any human being would sacrifice his honor and liberty in order to save the father of his affianced bride from ignominy. It vexed him that she should still cling to the self-confessed thief.

For some time both were silent. Finally she looked straight into his face, and said:

"Papa, something causes me to believe that the real robber will yet be captured and your name and the other's will be cleared of the black stain."

"I would it might be so," he said, gravely. "Ione, you must know that I thought a great deal of Philip Howard; you must know that his confession was a great shock to me; but you cannot blame me for thinking he spoke the truth. He came forward and saved me from prison, which shows that he had some manhood left, but I cannot believe that he was innocent and thus sacrificed himself."

"I am certain time will prove that I am right," firmly declared the noble girl who would not believe in her lover's guilt. "You must remember, papa, that the majority of the people in Burnton still believe you guilty, despite Philip's story, and for that reason we have left our home and come to this wild land. Even the bank officials doubted your honesty, and you lost your position after Philip had escaped from jail."

"There is no need to remind me of these things," muttered Owen Wilson, hoarsely. "I have thought of them till I am sick at heart. But for you, little one, I should have been driven to suicide ere this."

Then he again relapsed into silence, and peered out of the window at the varying scenery. The rest of the ride was made without much conversation. Both father and daughter seemed busy with their thoughts.

It was near noon when the stage rolled into Jacktown. The usual crowd was not gathered in front of the Silver Bell Hotel to witness the arrival of the hearse, but as Ione descended, she heard the sound of excited voices within.

Mr. Wilson paused to look after the luggage, but Ione ascended the steps and entered the building. She saw two doors, leading to the right and left. Ahead of her was a flight of stairs by which the upper portion of the building was reached. The door to the left was wide open, and without pausing to think of her position, she glanced into the room.

A startling sight met her gaze.

A throng of men were crowding forward toward a common center, those in the rear trying to peer over the heads of those in front. As she stood there, the circle of human beings parted, and she saw two men fighting. A gasping cry broke from her lips as her eyes rested on the face of one of the combatants. At that instant the man she was gazing at knocked his foe off his feet; then the circle closed up and there was a wild cheer.

"Heavens!" she gasped. "I must be deceived!"

But at that moment the cheering crowd lifted the victor upon their shoulders, and then Violet Vane saw the girl in the doorway. A cry of amazement and recognition burst from the Velvet Sport's lips. Their eyes met, and sick at heart, she sobbed:

"Merciful God! It is Philip Howard!"

CHAPTER X.

OLD-TIME LOVERS MEET.

For an instant Ione's strength came near entirely deserting her, and she was obliged to clutch at the side of the doorway for support. One hand she pressed to her heaving bosom, while her breath came and went in short gasps.

The victorious Sport was scarcely less moved. The cry which broke from his lips caused the larger portion of the crowd to look wonderingly at him and then follow his gaze to the girl in the doorway. Exclamations of surprise broke from the lips of the rough men.

Ione swiftly recovered her self-control, and moved from the open doorway.

"Jeehocus! er feemale!" cried Erastus Wagg.

"An' a smashin' han'sum one, too," observed Judge Blowbugle. Stranger in town. Must be ther stage's in. We hain't notissed it 'cause our 'tention waz tookeen in hyer. Heer goes fur ernuther look at thet gal."

And the judge made a break for the door.

In an instant the Velvet Sport and his great victory were forgotten. A handsome woman had more attractions for the average citizen of Jacktown than had the best man who ever stood on two feet, and the entire crowd followed Judge Blowbugle's example.

Violet Vane suddenly found himself on his feet, quite deserted by his late admirers. But

nothing could have happened just then that would have given him more satisfaction. At that moment he had no heart for applause or admiration. He had just seen the girl whom he loved better than life or honor, although a few minutes before he supposed her more than eighteen hundred miles away.

Was it she?

Suddenly he was seized by a doubt. Might he not have been deceived by a close resemblance? Why should Ione be there, so many miles from home? He must see the girl again.

To the door he hurried and was soon peering over the heads of those who had poured out ahead of him. Ione had gone back down the steps to meet her father, and Vane obtained a square look at her face as she paused by Mr. Wilson's side.

"Yes," he muttered, his heart giving a great throb of mingled joy and pain, "it is she! Her father is with her. I was not deceived."

Then he thought of the position in which she had seen him. How much of the disgraceful fist fight had she witnessed? He hoped that she had seen none of it.

As he stood there staring at her, both Mr. Wilson and Ione started to ascend the steps, the crowd parting to make way for them. Teddy Dunn, an employee of Dandy Dirk's, pressed forward to meet them.

Violet Vane turned swiftly away and hurried back into the saloon. He had no desire to meet Owen Wilson and his daughter face to face just then. He must have time to regain his composure.

Dandy Dirk's friends had assisted the unfortunate man from the room, which was now nearly deserted. Vane flung himself into a chair in one corner in such a position that no one could enter or leave the room unless he saw them.

"Heavens!" he muttered. "I little expected to see her here! I would have been less surprised had I felt the hand of an officer on my shoulder, for I am constantly on the watch for them. What can have brought Owen Wilson and Ione to the West? I cannot imagine."

"I hope she did not see me engaged in the fight with that dark-faced scoundrel. I have led a reckless life since my friends aided me to escape from jail, but I have had an object in view—to hunt down the real robber of the Burnton Bank. My friends gave me some clues, which added to those I had picked up ere I put myself in Owen Wilson's shoes, whom I knew to be as innocent as myself, gave me a starter for doing some detective work. I cannot say that I have made a brilliant success of that work, for during the last five or six months I have been quite at sea. My man vanished like a phantom, and since then I have wandered from place to place, frequenting the dens in which I fancied he would be the most liable to spend his time. In those places I have played cards, and my old skill and luck have stood by me. Almost always I have been the winner, and with the money I have also acquired the name of Velvet Sport—a card-sharp—gambler! What would she think of that?"

A low, unpleasant laugh escaped his lips and his face wore a disagreeable look for an instant.

"Fate has driven me where I am," he continued. "When my name is cleared of the stain upon it, I will leave this life behind. I voluntarily placed myself in the shoes of a self-confessed thief, but I did it for her dear sake. She was nearly heartbroken at the great trouble which had so suddenly come upon her. I had sworn that I would sacrifice my life for her happiness, and when the time came, I sacrificed more than life. I knew that Owen Wilson would stand trial and go to prison, from which he might never be released. I believed that there was a chance for me to relieve Mr. Wilson from his unpleasant situation and possibly escape to hunt down the real criminal. The result proved that I was not far from right."

"But Ione is here in this camp. She has seen me and was strangely moved. I will not waste much time ere I find occasion to speak with her. How will she meet me?"

The crowd came filing back into the room, discussing the new arrivals. Violet Vane heard the rough fellows praising the beauty of the girl. One cried:

"She's er daisy, pards; an' ef she's goin' ter stop in this hyer camp, Jacktown'll hev'er queen as'll knock the spots offen ther one Jasper stole."

The camp-tramp espied Vane in the corner, and uttered a whoop.

"Thar he is, feller-critters," cried Erastus, pointing toward the Velvet Sport, "thar's ther sweet-scented mounting posy as knocks ther seeds outer yer common tea-roses! Thar's ther

best man in this hyer camp, an' I'm willin' ter bet my clothes cl'are down ter my nose-wipe, which is er piece o' my last b'iled shurrut, thet he kin walk all over ther duffers o' Jasper. Thet's ther kind o' stuff I am built outer, an' my name's Wagg!"

In a moment Vane was surrounded by an admiring throng.

"Give ther boys er leetle speech," advised Judge Blowbugle at the little man's elbow.

"Gentlemen," said Vane, loud enough for every one to hear, "I am in no mood to make a speech just now, but will put a double X in the barkeep's hands, for you to celebrate the occasion," and Vane, tucking a twenty-dollar bill into the barkeeper's hand, made his exit from the room.

Half an hour later he was knocking at the door of the room which Owen Wilson and his daughter had secured, his heart in his mouth. There was a light, nervous step beyond, then the door was opened, and Ione stood before him!

"I have been expecting you," she said, simply. "Come in a moment."

She did not offer her hand: there was no warmth in her greeting; nothing but cold civility. He was chilled to the heart.

"Ione!" he breathed hoarsely, and then to have saved his life he could say no more.

He knew not to what a fearful tension her nerves were strained; he knew not how she was battling to control herself; he saw only her cold, calm manner, and white, bloodless face. Like one dazed, he staggered into the room. She placed a chair, and motioned for him to be seated, but he shook his head, and remained standing. Owen Wilson was not present.

"You wish to speak with me, Mr. Howard?" she asked.

"I came to see you," he murmured, scarcely knowing what he said. "I thought—perhaps you—"

Then he stopped helplessly. He could not tell her that he had hoped she might receive him differently.

"Is there anything in particular of which you wish to speak?"

He shook his head, staring doubtfully at her. Was this Ione—his Ione—the warm-hearted, impulsive girl he had known ere fate had torn them apart?

Finally he managed to ask:

"Why are you here?"

"I came with my father, who intends making investments in the West," she replied. "We could stay in Burnton no longer, where our former friends did not recognize us."

He started.

"Did not recognize you?" he exclaimed.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we are social outcasts."

"But, surely, there can be no one who dares to still believe your father guilty?"

"There is, however."

He uttered an exclamation of anger, although his heart leaped at the thought that some one believed him innocent of crime.

"The short-sighted fools!" he cried. But then he remembered how coldly she met him, and a maddening thought flashed like fire in his brain.

"But you, Ione—surely you do not believe me guilty?"

She shook her head.

"No—and yet you are not the man I once thought. The scene which I witnessed to-day sickened my very heart."

He recoiled as if struck a heavy blow. She had seen what he feared. As soon as he could gain his self-control, he said:

"Ione, this is a wild country, and a man must defend himself."

"Is that your excuse for indulging in a bar-room brawl with a score of howling human beings laughing and cheering around you as they might around fighting dogs? Merciful heavens! It will be a long time ere I forget that sight!"

His pride was touched to the quick.

"Ione, you have misjudged me," he asserted, quietly. "When you consider all that I have done, and the fact that I am constantly forced to fight my way in this almost hopeless hunt for the Burnton bank robber, you will change your mind. Just now it is better for us to part. Good-day."

The next moment he was gone.

"Great God! How she has changed!" he groaned, as he descended the stairs. "Has her heart turned to stone?"

And within her room, Ione had flung herself upon the bed and burst into a flood of tears.

"Oh, Philip! Philip! Philip!" she wailed.

"How I have loved you! how I have loved you! Merciful heaven! I love you now more than all the world—more than life!"

CHAPTER XI.

SURE TO "GIT THAR."

THE Velvet Sport was met by Erastus Wagg, shortly after leaving Ione. The eccentric old fellow seized Vane's hand, and shook it heartily, at the same time saying:

"Ding my eyes ef it don't do me proud ter git holt o' yer fin! Ye'r ther best leetle man I've seen fur er right smart time. Fact is, I never *did* see but one leetle sardine as c'u'd hole er candle ter ye, an' he war built after your style, 'cept he had yaller ha'r an' blue eyes. He wore posies, but they wuz gold ones, sot with dimints—gold daisies—an' folks called him Daisy Dara. You an' he w'u'd make a clippin' span, but ye see he got struck on er black-eyed gal, an'—wa-al, he wuz er goner!"

Wagg's last words were uttered in such a dolorous tone that Vane was forced to smile.

"It wuz hard fer me ter give 'im up," sighed the tramp; "but I reesigned merself inter ther han's o' fate. They got hitched, an' I sloped, fur I c'u'dn't b'ar ter hang 'round thar arter thet. 'Twas allus thus; I never loved er posy dood, but he wuz ther fu'st ter fall—in love. Fortune has ever b'in erg'in' me, an' now you see ther wreck o' er once noble an' mighty interlec'. But life is too short fur pinin'."

The Sport smiled again.

"My friend," he said, "you have been smelling pretty freely of coffin varnish. Look out or you will get off your pins."

Wagg gave Vane a resentful look.

"Pard," he said, soberly, "you don't know E. Wagg, Esq. I seldom fool with ther stuff w'at biteth like a snake an' stings wuss'n er bumble-bee; but w'en I do, I allus go light. No man ever knew Erastus Wagg to drink more than a pint an' a half without stoppin' ter ketch his breath. It's erg'in' my principle ter make er hog o' merself, but I never c'u'd b'ar fer bad likker ter go beggin' fur sumbody ter put it out er misery."

"A pint and a half! Is that what you call going light? What is your stomach made of?" It was Wagg's turn to laugh.

"Wa-al, really I don't drink offen," he protested. "It's only on sich geolorious 'casions as ther present thet I git fired up. I've seen ernuff o' ther durned likker's work ter wish it never had been invented. One't I swore off, an' I didn't drink enny fur er right smart time, but all thet while I saw good men killin' themselves w' ther cussed stuff. Then I kinder made up my mind thet I wuz er wu'thless ole sinner, an' ef I did my best ter drink up ther p'izen an' keep it frum temptin' better men, I'd be doin' er kineness ter humanity."

"Which to my mind is very poor logic," declared Vane, who could not help being amused by this strange fellow, who had championed his cause from the beginning.

"Waal, it may be," Erastus admitted. "I hain't much o' er logicer. But, pard, I want ter tell ye ter look out fur thet dark-faced galoot w'at ye knocked ther spots offen. He's goin' ter 'member ye, an' I'll bet he'll make trubble fur ye."

"Thanks. I should not be surprised if you were right. Something tells me that he is my foe."

"Tell ye w'at, Sweet Violets, ye kin depen' on me ef ye git inter er corner. I'll fight fur ye's long as I kin keep on mer pins. I reckon ye've made er few frien's in this hyer camp who are with me in this matter."

"It is often fortunate to have friends, and I assure you that I appreciate your kindness. The time may come when I shall need all the friends that I can make in this place."

"Ther biggest part o' ther crowd likes yer style, fur all o' ther fac' thet they laffed at ye w'en ye fu'st showed up. Er galoot w'at kin sling on ther lugs an' back 'em up is all right in this kentry. But ef he can't, he'd better wear ole clo'se an' stogy boots like I do. W'at keeps me in not water mer mouth, as wuz built too large fur mer pluck. I offen make talk w'at ole Sampson hisself c'u'dn't back up."

"That is bad."

"Oh, well, w'en I git inter er bad scrape, I depen' on mer legs ter take me out, like they did w'en thet big galoot got after me jest afore you showed up. By gum! you tuck ther wind offen his stummic in large style."

"What are they doing in the saloon?"

"Scussin' you an' ther pritty gal as lately struck ther camp. Tell ye, pard, she's er stunner! Didn't see her, did ye?"

"Yes."

"Waal, so ye did. Guess you notissed her fu'st w'en she stud in ther door o' ther skaloon. They're torkin' 'bout makin' her queen o' ther camp, or suthin' o' ther sort. Seems they had er queen, but Jasper got her 'way frum 'em. They say she wuz er luller, but this one is jest er jot ahead o' her."

Erastus spoke the truth; within the saloon the crowd was discussing the appearance of the beautiful girl whom they had seen, and speaking of the possibility of her becoming known as the queen of the camp. Inspired by the liquor which he had imbibed, Judge Blowbugle mounted a table and made a speech to the crowd, in which he urged the men of the camp to offer Owen Wilson and his daughter such inducements to remain in Jacktown that nothing would cause them to go away. He concluded by proposing that a delegation of the most prominent citizens should be selected to immediately wait on the strangers, learn their business, and present the prospects of the place in as favorable light as possible.

This speech was received with applause, and several of the crowd were immediately chosen to call on Mr. Wilson and Ione, Judge Blowbugle being one of the number, of course. The committee were instructed to make Owen Wilson any business proposition that their judgment might think for the best; the camp would stand their talk.

They left the room and were shown up to the Wilsons' department. The crowd remained in suspense until they finally returned.

Once more Blowbugle mounted a table, and drawing the red bandanna from his pocket, he blew his nose in a business-like manner ere uttering a word.

"Feller-citizens uv this hyer geolorious town uv Jacktown," he cried, pompously, "air ye red dy ter lissen ter ther report uv yer ker-mitty?"

"Yas, let er slide," shouted several.

"Cordin' ter deerections we have called on Mr. Owen Wilson and darter," continued the judge, in an oratorical manner. "We hav' learned several things uv importance. Fu'st: Mr. Wilson is lookin' fur er place ter invest er considerable sum uv money. Second: He is quite pleased with ther 'pearance uv Jacktown. Third: He is er tenderfut, but he's ez sharp ez chain-lightnin'."

"Ter be course, citizens uv Jacktown, we presented ther present satterwation uv this hyer camp in ther purtiest culler possible. We tole him thet all Jacktown needed wuz er small ermount uv capital, an' plenty uv push an' brains. We tried ter induce him ter make sum deffynite statement as ter whether he thought he w'u'd stay ur not, but he w'u'd not kermit hisself. But let me tell ye, feller-citizens, all thet is needed ter keep him hyer, is ter show him whar he kin putt his money to advantage. "We kin do thet!"

"Galoots uv Jacktown, it 'pears ter me thet ther dawn uv prosperity is right upon us. I'm willin' ter believe thet ther leetle man as wears ther Johnny-jump-ups kin knock out ther best men uv Jasper; an' as fer ther gal in ther room above us, as queen uv Jacktown, she'll lay 'way over ther queen thet Jasper robbed us uv."

"Frien's an' neybars, lift up yer heads, fer ther mornin' light is breakin'. Let yer hearts be full uv thanksgivin' fer our redemption is at han'. A golden era uv prosperity an' happiness is knockin' at ther door, an' over ther eastern hills ther bright rays uv ther sun uv joy is stealin'. Let hope dwell within yer buzzums, an' w'en ye git a chance, allus bet yer last dollar thet Jacktown will git thar jest ther same!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE PRICE OF A LIFE.

WHEN Dandy Dirk fully recovered from the effect of the final blows which the man in velvet had planted beneath his ear and on his jaw, he found himself lying on a cot-bed in one of the small rooms of the Silver Bell. Tiger Joe was bending over him, holding a bottle of liquor to his lips.

"Take jest a drap, boss," urged Joe. "It'll set yer blood ter movin' an' kinder wake ye up. It must 'a' bin er reg'ler swynger ter knock ye silly in this 'ere way."

"Swynger!" growled the Blizzard, who sat in a chair near at hand. "It must 'a' bin wussen a muel's kick. It takes a slice uv chain-lightnin' ter send Dandy's wits wool-gatherin'."

The man on the bed swallowed a little of the fiery liquid, which seemed to arouse him and give him sudden strength, for he started up, glaring wildly around.

"What has happened?" he muttered. "My head—it feels dreadful!"

"Don't ax me w'at's happened," rejoined Ben. "Ye can't prove nothin' by me, 'cause w'ile ye waz rasselin' with thet leetle sardine, I waz layin' on thet same bed gittin' over ther dose he guv me. Hain't got over it yit."

"I remember!" exclaimed Dandy suddenly. "That cursed tenderfoot!"

"Guess thet's w'at's ther matter with ye," grunted the bully. "He's left his mark."

"Bring me a glass," commanded the man on the bed. "I want to look at myself."

"Ye ain't ser pretty ez ye uster waz, boss," observed Ben, who appeared to take a brutal delight in the fact that Dandy had been used as bad as he had. "Ther leetle rat in velvet dun his best ter sp'ile yer gud looks."

"Bring me a glass!" thundered Dandy, furiously. "Are you both asleep?"

Tiger Joe hastened to take down a small glass from where it hung against the wall and place it in the angry man's hands. Both of Dandy's eyes were badly swelled, and his face showed the marks of Violet Vane's knuckles. For several moments he gazed in silence at his reflection in the small mirror. Finally he said, in an icy tone:

"Rather a pretty picture! Pleasant to contemplate! A fine object to be seen in public!"

"Your face looks like er map uv Asia," declared the bully.

Dandy shot him a terrible glance.

"You dry up!" he said, in a manner which Ben plainly knew meant danger. "You are altogether too free with your lip!"

And the bully remained silent.

"That cursed little whelp shall pay for this," asserted Dandy, grimly. "There will be a big settlement in the nea. future.—Joe, bring me some water that I may bathe my face."

The fire-eater hastened to obey, and the unlucky proprietor of the Silver Bell bathed his bruised countenance in the cool liquid. When this was done, he produced a bottle of liniment from the drawer of a small stand and applied some of it to the contusions on his face. Then he bound a handkerchief around his head in such a manner that his eyes were partially concealed, but allowing him to peer from beneath the bandage.

"Now give me a good pull at that bottle," he said. "I will be able to get around, I guess."

Joe passed him the bottle, and he took a heavy drink.

"There, that puts life into me. Now Mr. Violet Vane had best look out for me! Nothing but his life will satisfy my revenge. He has crossed my path, and must be put out of the way. Something seems to tell me that this little fop is my bitterest and most dangerous enemy. I feel that if he is not downed, he will down me."

"I don't love ther leetle cuss none too much," asserted Blizzard Ben; "but I hain't got no reason fer ter putt him down fur good an' all."

Dandy turned toward Ben, suddenly.

"You have cause to hate this little devil," said he. "For that reason I suppose that you could cook his hash without much remorse."

"Waal, I might—if thar waz an objec'," admitted the bully, cautiously.

"And you, Joe?"

But the Tiger shook his head.

"Ef ye've got enny common jobs, I'm yer man; but I hain't hirin' as er cut-throat."

"All right," said Dandy, shortly. "Ben and I can attend to him. An even hundred is ready for you, Ben, when the Velvet Sport is toes up, if you put him there."

"Nuff sed," was the short manner in which the bully accepted the cold-blooded offer of a paltry sum for a human life.

"At the same time," observed Dandy, "I shall watch my chance to give him his last sickness. I would like to drop him in a fair manner for the looks of the thing; but fair or foul, down he goes! It means death to cross Dandy Dirk's path!"

With these words he left the room. He did not enter the saloon, but proceeded to his own private room in the upper part of the building. He did not leave that room for more than an hour, during which time many events already related transpired.

When Dandy did come forth again, he was attracted by the sound of a feminine voice, which proceeded from a room, the door of which was slightly ajar. He paused in such a position that he could peer into the room, and came near uttering a cry of amazement as his eyes rested on Owen Wilson's face. For a moment he stared at the man as if fascinated.

"Great Jove!" Dandy mentally exclaimed. "Can it be that man?"

Finally he changed his position so that he could see the face of the girl whom he had heard speaking a moment before. He was surprised and delighted as he noted Ione's beauty.

"By heavens! she's a rosebud!" was his silent comment. "She must be his daughter."

"Why have you been weeping, Ione?" Owen Wilson asked. "Your eyes betray you."

She was silent and confused.

"I fancy I can tell," continued the ex-bank-president. "You too, have seen him."

"Whom do you mean, father?"

"The Burnton bank robber! He is here in this very town. I have seen him!"

"Oh, father!"

But Mr. Wilson was aroused, and for the time he discarded forbearance.

"Yes, I have seen him!" he repeated, with suppressed excitement. "He is here at liberty, but he cannot long escape the clutch of the law."

"Is that so?" muttered Dandy; and with a very white face, the proprietor of the Silver Bell silently descended the stairs.

CHAPTER XIII.

A WARM RECEPTION.

It was past mid-day when into Jacktown came a hatless horseman, mounted on a foam-flecked horse, which he had evidently urged to the limit of its ability. Down the main street of the camp he rode, a revolver in each hand, firing shot after shot into the air.

It was Ned Norris, who had reached Jacktown ahead of the mob from Jasper City!

The firing quickly aroused the citizens of the little camp in Paradise Gulch, and with drawn weapons, they rushed forth to learn what the trouble was.

In front of the Silver Bell Ned drew up. A throng had poured forth from the building with Mr. Wagg at their head, and Judge Blowbugle in the rear, looking somewhat alarmed and ready to run should there be any actual danger on the street.

"Hello, pard," was Wagg's greeting, "w'at's bruck loose? You look like ther Ole Boy'd chased ye with er pan o' hot coals."

"Men of Jacktown!" cried the youth on the horse, "you want to prepare to defend yourselves and your property. Within thirty minutes a drunken crowd of the worst men in Jasper will be here, and they have sworn to clean out this camp and burn every building. I have come at the risk of my life to warn you!"

This startling intelligence was received with various emotions by the crowd. Some laughed, some swore, some uttered exclamations of alarm, and many said nothing at all. The exuberant Erastus leaped into the air, knocking his heels together and giving utterance to a crow that would have done credit to a Bramah rooster.

"Whoop!" he cried. "Let 'em cum! They'll find us campin' right hyer. There will be ther greatest ole jubilee this town ever saw. Jeehocus! Won't we have a whole time!"

But many of the others did not seem so delighted at the prospect. They felt that a visit from Jasper's bad men meant something serious. Judge Blowbugle in particular turned very white as he pressed forward to ask:

"You are sure they are comin' here? There hain't no mistook, is there?"

"Not any," was Ned's reply. "They are coming loaded, and that means trouble."

"Fur them," cut in the camp tramp. "This camp hain't only loaded, but it's cocked and primed. Ef we don't make ther galoos o' Jasper sick an' tired ter ther pits o' their stummics, then I'll crawl inter a hoel an' pull ther hoel in arter me."

"You had better be preparing to defend yourselves," urged the young man who had given the warning. "You may find it no boys' play, for the very worst element of Jasper is coming. The liquor they have drank will make them very devils in their fury."

There was an immediate scattering of the crowd. Some started to warn those who had not heard Morris's words; others hastened toward their homes to prepare for the conflict.

"Whar's ther posy in velvet?" shouted Erastus Wagg. "Whar's Johnny-jump-up? He's ther leetle sardine w'at we wants now. We kin make use o' him, you bet."

But no one seemed to know where Violet Vane was just then.

Tiger Joe hastened to inform Dandy Dirk of the threatened raid. He found the hotel proprietor and Blizzard Ben closeted in the little

back room where Dandy had been taken after the conflict with the Velvet Sport.

"What is the row, Joe?" demanded Dandy, as the little fire-eater entered.

"The devil's to pay!" was the reply. "A crowd from Jasper is cumin' fur us red-hot. Ther fur will fly round hyer afore a nour."

Both Dandy and Ben sprung up.

"What's that?" demanded the former, sharply.

"A feller frum Jasper jest tole us thet ther toughest men uv ther town are comin' fer hyer. He says they are chin-full uv likker, an' mean ter wipe out this camp, an' burn every buildin'."

Dandy looked startled.

"That means big trouble," he said. "We must be ready for them. Meanwhile, Ben, you watch your chance, which may come during the excitement. If you want another man's aid, take Joe. He will be ready to aid you on that kind of a job."

Then the dark gambler hurriedly left the room. Within the saloon he found a scene of confusion. Every one seemed excited and alarmed, but no one seemed to know just what should be done.

With a few brief, pointed words, Dandy restored order, and drew the attention of every one. Then he gave directions for closing the bar, fastening the entrance to the building and manning the windows. Within the hotel were half a dozen rifles, and these he directed Teddy Dunn to bring out and place in the hands of the best marksmen, who were to station themselves at the upper windows of the building. The other inmates of the place who could handle revolvers were directed to take their positions at such places as they thought best.

"We will give them a warm reception," decided Dandy, quietly. "I reckon that the main street of this town will be a mighty hot gantlet to run."

His manner gave others confidence, and preparations for the defense went on swiftly.

Leaving the saloon, Dandy ascended the stairs. In the corridor above he met Mr. Wilson, who inquired what so much noise and excitement meant. With a few well-chosen words the proprietor of the Silver Bell explained the situation.

"Your daughter had better remain in her room," said Dandy, appearing somewhat uneasy in Mr. Wilson's presence. "If you can shoot a little and have a revolver, we shall be pleased to have your assistance. We shall need every man we can muster to repel the invaders. The toughs of Jasper are a hard crowd."

The Easterner said nothing, but hastened to carry the startling news to Ione. Dandy watched him closely until the door concealed him from view, then he went on and entered his own room.

When the dark gambler again appeared, which he did within ten minutes, he bore a Winchester rifle in his hands. Dandy proposed to take an active part in the defense.

Throughout the town the citizens were preparing for a desperate battle. They felt that Jasper City intended to end the rivalry by "wiping out" the camp in Paradise Gulch, and the men of Jacktown were very bitter in their feelings toward the boomers' camp. Many of the citizens firmly intended to shoot to kill, when through the camp was passed the word to drop the Jasperites' horses first, and only when forced to do so were they to drop a man.

Blowbugle had remained within the Silver Bell Hotel, and the portly old fellow seemed to have entirely lost his usual pomposity. Indeed, his face was very white and he trembled visibly.

"This is terrible!" he muttered, as he wiped the cold perspiration from his face. "We shall all be killed! Ther gover'mint sh'd suppress sich outrages!"

The judge peered into the corners and behind the doors in search for a place to secrete himself when the battle should begin, but could find no suitable shelter. As the moments passed he grew more and more alarmed until he was finally in a most distressing state of terror. At last, hearing a yelling on the street, the judge made a frantic rush and crawled beneath the bar.

The yells which he had heard came from the throat of the happy Wagg, who was mounted upon a scrawny white horse, which appeared thirty years old at least, and was galloping up and down the main street of Jacktown.

"Whoop!" he bellowed. "This is ther galorous day o' salvation! Thar's fun in ther air, an' don't ye fergit it! Ther galoos frum Jasper will run erg'in' ther wu'st sit o' sickness as they ever wuz interjuiced ter. Ther way we will warp it ter 'em will make ther gods o' war

shed tears o' sackersfaction. Three cheers an' er double-an'-twisted yoop fur Jacktown! Yah-hoo-yah!"

Evidently Erastus intended to take a hand in the battle, for he had secured a fine-looking repeating rifle, which he wildly swung around his head as he galloped along the street.

Down the street toward the point where the Jasperites were expected to first make their appearance he urged the white horse, which, despite its aged and worthless appearance, seemed to get over the ground at a remarkably brisk rate of speed. Evidently the old animal was better than it looked.

"I'm goin' out ter meet ther varlets o' Jasper an' down 'em single-handed," roared the rider. "I'm no canary bird as sits in its leetle cage an' don't sing, I hain't! I'm er music-makin' wild-wood nightingale, I am! I'm er b-a-a-d man frum Red Hot, an' my name's Wagg! Whoopee!"

Then he disappeared down the street toward Jasper City. In less than five minutes he reappeared, hanging to the old horse's short mane and lashing the animal's sides with his legs. He had lost his hat and his usually laughing face was transformed into a look of absolute terror. The old horse also seemed badly frightened, and the appearance of both the man and the animal was comical in the extreme.

"Jeehocus!" he shouted. "They're cumin', more'n er leetle millyon o' 'em! Every man's armed with a double-barriled cannon, an' ye kin see grape-shot an' canister stickin' outer ther muzzles. Hunt yer holes, ye common critters, an' be prepared fer Gabriel!"

And when he disappeared up the street, no one expected that he would cease to urge forward the old white horse until he had put a goodly distance between himself and the point of danger.

Not far behind him came a crowd from Jasper City. Into the town they rode, yelling and firing at the windows of the buildings they passed. They had thought to take the place by surprise, and were amazed when their fire was promptly returned. Ere they came in sight of the Silver Bell Hotel four of their horses had been shot down.

The Silver Bell was the first building on which they intended making a united attack, but when they approached it, every window seemed to belch with smoke, and a perfect rain of lead fell upon them. Half a dozen horses were down and several men wounded, ere they could hurl themselves at the building. Seized by a sudden panic, and partially sebered by such an unexpected reception, the drunken gang dashed past the building and onward up the street.

A cheer went up from the inmates of the hotel, and the crowd would have rushed forth in pursuit of the men from Jasper City, had not Dandy Dirk prevented them.

"Hold on!" he cried. "Those fellows will come back, and if we are on the street with no shelter, we may get the worst of it. Hold steady, every man."

And the Jasper City gang did come back. They came in a hurry, and seemed trying to get out of the way of two horsemen who were closely following them.

The horsemen were Erastus Wagg and the Velvet Sport!

Both of the pursuers were armed with repeating rifles, and they sent a terrible hail of bullets among the horses of the retreating roughs, dropping animal after animal. Some of the riders thus unseated were injured by the fall, and those who were not made haste to get out of harm's way. The garrison of the hotel uttered a wild cheer, and sent a withering fire among the demoralized men.

As Erastus Wagg and Violet Vane dashed past the hotel, the former looked up at the windows, with a broad grin on his homely face, and yelled:

"Hooraw fer us!"

It was impossible to restrain the excited and delighted crowd. They tore open the doors and windows, and sprung out into the street, to follow close at the heels of the white horse rider and the Velvet Sport.

CHAPTER XIV.

ONE WAY TO SETTLE THE TROUBLE.

To the boundary of the camp the jubilant citizens of Jacktown pursued the retreating mob from the rival camp. In their excitement, they would have pursued them still further had not Violet Vane persuaded them not to do so.

"They will recover from their temporary defeat, and if we follow them further, a battle

will ensue in which lives will be lost," said the clear-headed little Sport. "Thus far, I do not think a man has been fatally injured on either side. Our foes have lost several good horses, and some of the riders have not escaped without leaving a little of their blood behind, but we have no desire to take one life, unless forced to do so. If we stop right here, these shanties will serve as a protection, from behind which we can fire, if they attempt to enter the town again."

"Which same is good, solid, hoss-sense," declared Erastus Wagg.

The majority of the Jacktownites readily recognized the good judgment which the man in velvet displayed in his words, and with some difficulty the hot-heads were restrained from pressing the pursuit.

As soon as the crowd from Jasper City discovered that the pursuit had ceased, they came to a halt. The men of Jacktown watched them with interest and saw the defeated roughs draw together, evidently for a consultation.

"They're goin' to hold a pow-wow," observed Erastus, with a chuckle of delight. "Ef they hain't had ernuff o' Jacktown they'd better cum back an' took ernuther dose. We'll be reddy ter receive 'em with open arms. I tell you, pards o' Jacktown, such er picnie as this jest duz my ole soul good!"

The mob from Jasper City appeared very excited, for they would occasionally utter a chorus of yells and fire a few shots into the air. Finally one man left the main body and advanced toward the camp, holding up a stick, to which a white flag was attached.

"Er flag o' truce," cried Wagg, quickly. "Who's ter go out an' meet ther critter?"

Violet Vane was immediately chosen. Without hesitation, the Velvet Sport stepped out and advanced to meet the man with the flag.

As Vane advanced, he saw that the stranger was a tall, handsome fellow, who was dressed similar to many card-sharps whom he had encountered.

"The champion card-player of the camp, I'll bet," thought the man in velvet.

And he was right, for it was High Card Harry.

The sport of Jasper City had not been drinking nearly so much as his companions, but being a reckless fellow by nature, he joined with the crowd for the sake of the excitement. He smiled scornfully as his eyes ran over the elegant figure of the little dandy who had been chosen to represent Jacktown.

"I would like an interview with a citizen of this camp," announced High Card Harry, bowing slightly, with the undisguised sneer still on his face.

"I have been chosen to represent ther citizens of Jacktown," was Vane's quiet reply.

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the Jasper City ambassador, putting the sneer into his words. "Why didn't they choose a man?"

"The people of Jacktown seem to regard me as such," returned Vane, coolly; "and you may also do me that honor when we are better acquainted."

"Possibly, but— Well, never mind. I have come to say that on one condition will the men of Jasper withdraw, and leave this camp unmolested—and only one."

"Name it."

"Jacktown must pay for the horses shot, and furnish free liquor for the crowd—all they can drink."

"A very modest demand," remarked Violet Vane, with an apparent attempt to suppress a derisive laugh; "very modest, indeed."

High Card Harry flushed. Could it be that this contemptible little fop was making sport of him?

"I think you will find it reasonable, and I am sure that it will be for Jacktown's interest to comply with the demand."

"You may think the demand reasonable, but I fancy the men of Jacktown will not look at it in that light."

"Why should they not? Haven't they shot down sixteen of our best horses, besides three or four that were not so good?"

"The fortunes of war. Had you not been met by men who were ready and waiting for you, I fancy that Jacktown would have suffered worse than you have. As it is, you may thank your lucky stars that you got off so cheaply. Had the men of Jacktown been thus inclined, every horse that fell would have been a man."

"Am I to understand that Jacktown defies Jasper City?"

"Well, I presume that that is about the dimensions of it."

"Then let me tell you now," cried High Card

Harry, furiously, "we will lay your dirty little camp in ashes!"

"And let me tell you now," was Vane's quiet retort, "that your crowd is not built right to perform that little trick. Let me also warn you that you will be handled without gloves if you ruffians dare to approach Jacktown again. We are able to whip the whole of Jasper with our right hands tied behind our backs."

"Why, you insolent little puppy!" hissed the sport of Jasper, "do you know that we can muster two men to your one, and that the good men of our camp can clean out the best men of Jacktown without trying?"

"You may be able to muster two men to our one, but your good men are simply no good at all. We can clean you out at anything you see fit to name. Our confidence in our own ability to do so is such that we will try your good men a whirl, and if you win, I will agree to make good whatever loss you may have sustained to-day."

High Card Harry was delighted.

"I will accept the conditions, and will give my word of honor that if we are defeated we will withdraw and leave this camp unmolested in the future," he said.

"That is satisfactory, but we shall not admit your crowd to the camp, and we shall be constantly on the outlook for treachery. If we see a foul move, it will be the worse for you. Your crowd must remain where it now is, and we will meet you there with an equal number."

"That is satisfactory. When you come, bring your best card player, for I shall try him a whirl at the start. Let him have his pockets well lined with money, for drawer-poker is my favorite game."

Then they separated to carry the reports of the meeting to the rival factions. The men of Jasper received the intelligence with great enthusiasm. The Jacktownites, with the exception of Erastus Wagg, were less demonstrative. The woolly-headed man was delighted.

"Whoopee!" he squealed. "They'll git their stummicks full! Sweet Violets kin give 'em a picnic!"

The men of Jacktown went forth to meet their foes, carrying a small round table and two chairs. Weapons were freely displayed, for many of the Jacktownites anticipated treachery on the part of the enemies.

High Card Harry was ready for business.

"Trot out your good card-player," he said.

"Waal, now, stranger," drawled Erastus Wagg, as he tapped the velvet sport on the shoulder, this hyer leetle runt kin play sum. Ye kin begin on him."

"I don't want to waste my time on a greeny," sneered High Card Harry. "If you have a man who can play at all, bring him up to the chalk-mark."

"I will do my best to make it interesting for you, my friend," said Vane, quietly, as he sat down at the table.

CHAPTER XV.

HIGH CARD HARRY MEETS HIS MATCH.

HIGH CARD HARRY smiled grimly as he sat down opposite the Velvet Sport.

"I suppose you are well loaded with the stuff?" he said, interrogatively.

"Well, I have enough to last a few minutes," replied Violet Vane.

"The one who drains the other of his cash is the best man, is he?"

Vane bowed.

"And the limit?"

"Will five thousand do?"

"That is satisfactory."

Then they cut for the deal, the cards falling to Vane. As he picked them up, he said:

"The gentlemen from Jasper will please keep to their side, and Jacktown's citizens will remain on their side. That will prevent any double-dealing on the part of either."

The ante was set at ten dollars; Vane threw the cards, and the game began.

As Dandy Dirk had done, High Card Harry soon began to win. Vane watched him closely, although he seemed to seldom glance across the board. It did not take the little Sport long to discover that Jasper's champion card-player was an adept at double and bottom-dealing, shuffling up, and various other card tricks. But Vane was "no slouch" at such little games, and he decided inwardly that High Card Harry would have to hustle if he came out the best man.

Slowly High Card Harry ran ahead until he had secured nearly four thousand dollars of Vane's money.

Finally Vane opened a large jack-pot, holding up three seven spots and a ten, and calling for

one card. He got in another ten, giving him a light full hand; but watching closely, he saw High Card Harry steal a card from the bottom of the pack.

"That makes him a flush I am ready to wager my life," thought Vane. "He is looking for two pairs in my hand, or possibly three of a kind."

The Velvet Sport bet a hundred, and High Card Harry promptly set him five hundred. The little man set Harry in turn, and in a few moments the game grew remarkably interesting. Soon the sport from Jasper City had put his entire winnings into the pot, and then he called. He uttered an angry exclamation, and flung his flush on the table, as he saw Violet Vane's full hand. The Velvet Sport smiled quietly as he raked in the pot.

"That was a pure streak of luck for you," growled Harry. "But fortune will not favor you in that way always."

Vane said nothing, but from that time he won nearly every pot. All of High Card Harry's tricks seemed of no avail. If he shuffled up a good hand, the Velvet Sport was sure to cut the cards, and if he dealt himself a pair from the bottom, Vane almost always drew a better pair from the top. Gradually Harry lost his temper and his nerve.

"Confound the beastly luck! These cards are bewitched!" he cried. "Can't some one furnish us with a fresh pack?"

In a moment half a dozen packs were flung upon the table. Tossing the ones that they had been playing with back over his shoulder, the sport from Jasper City selected a sealed pack and broke open the wrapper.

"We will see if I can do any better with these," he said.

The game continued, the Velvet Sport seeming to grow more careless and less watchful.

High Card Harry had a trick in reserve which he had not yet attempted to call into play; but he now recognized the fact that, not only was Violet Vane an adept at poker, but he was remarkably fortunate in drawing. The Jasper City sport resolved to exercise every known artifice to win.

For some time the two players kept about even, first one taking a pot, then the other. Finally another large Jack-pot was made. In running over the cards as he shuffled, Vane noticed that two aces were missing. Then he resolved to catch the gambler. Swiftly he shuffled up the cards, and they came together in fine shape. Then he dealt them, giving his antagonist a pair of aces and taking three trays himself. High Card Harry opened the pot and called for two cards. Vane took two, and drew in a fourth tray.

"Now there will be sport," thought the little man.

And there was.

High Card Harry chipped five hundred dollars, and Vane promptly set him a thousand. Then the sport from Jasper City raised the pot two thousand, following which Vane went the limit.

By this time there was great excitement around the table. In less than a minute High Card Harry put in his last dollar, and said:

"There, that is all I have, but if I had ten thousand more, I would put it up. I call."

"I have four trays," said Vane, as he threw down his hand.

"And I have four aces!" cried Harry, displaying the cards and reaching to rake in the money.

But he found himself looking into the muzzle of a small derringer, held in Violet Vane's white hand.

"Not so fast, my Christian friend," said the little man, calmly. "This money belongs to me!"

High Card Harry turned black with rage and fury as he shouted:

"You lie! Four aces beat four trays."

"When honestly obtained," acknowledged the Velvet Sport. "When obtained in any other manner they do not. Two of those aces you did not obtain fairly."

"Again you lie, you little whelp!" snarled the alarmed and angry gambler. "If you do not swallow the insult, give up that money, and beg my pardon, I will order my men to down you and your crowd."

"Oh, no you won't," laughed the Velvet Sport. "Such a thing would prove very unhealthy—for you. You will observe that I have the drop. If one of your men dares lift a weapon, I shall instantly perforate you with a lead pill. But that is not all. While we have been playing, at least half of your men have wandered away to shady spots, where they can lie

down and sleep off the effect of too much liquor. Those who remain are outnumbered two to one."

Vane spoke the truth, and a glance over his shoulder convinced High Card Harry of the folly of precipitating a battle. With a bitter curse, he demanded:

"How could I cheat when you dealt the cards? This is an outrage!"

"Will some one please count the cards on the table?" called Vane.

"Bet yer boots!" exclaimed Erastus Wagg, promptly stepping forward.

"Pick them all up and throw them down one at a time, so that all may see and count," commanded the man in velvet, still holding Harry covered. "Be slow and careful."

High Card Harry turned very pale, but watched Wagg's movements in silence.

"Jest fifty keerds," announced the investigator, as he threw down the last one.

"Which shows that two are missing," said the Velvet Sport, grimly, gazing into his opponent's eyes. "Will you account for them, sir?"

"Account for them yourself!" snapped Harry. "You handled them last."

"My friend," smiled the little man with the violets, "it takes more than a sleeve holdout to beat me. Will you acknowledge that this money is rightfully mine, or shall I have your sleeve searched?"

For several moments High Card Harry was speechless, then he snarled:

"Take the money, but mark this: You shall hear from me again in a way that you will despise."

"You acknowledge yourself beaten?"

"For the present, yes."

Then Violet Vane pocketed the money.

At this moment a shout attracted the attention of those who had been breathlessly watching the dramatic termination of the game, and glancing swiftly in the direction from whence it came, they saw two men holding a horse by the bit while three more dragged the rider from the saddle.

The horseman was Ned Morris, and those who had sprung upon him were some of the Jasper City gang. As they pulled him from the horse, they repeated the shout, and a moment later the men of Jasper who had been watching the game started in a run toward Morris and his five captors, High Card Harry with them.

Violet Vane sprang up.

"Men of Jacktown," he cried, "there is trouble there! Follow me!"

CHAPTER XVI.

LAUGHING LU TO THE RESCUE.

IN some way a portion of the Jasper City toughs had discovered that Ned Morris had warned the citizens of Jacktown of the mob's approach, and they had sworn to have revenge on the youth for the act. Therefore when five of them succeeded in capturing the young fellow, they gave the signal which called the entire band around them. When Morris's offense was made known to all, a wild cry went up:

"Lynch him!"

Toward the nearest tree he was dragged, some one producing a rope with remarkable quickness. The liquor-maddened fellows intended to make quick work of him whom they considered a traitor.

Suddenly up the gulch from the direction of Jasper City came a horse and rider, the latter being a female. The men of the rival camps saw her, and cried in chorus:

"Laughing Lu!"

Straight toward the mob around the tree she urged her horse. High Card Harry saw her, and uttered a curse as he hastened to fit the noose around Ned Morris's neck and fling the rope over a limb.

"Up with the traitor!" shouted the card sharp.

But at that instant Violet Vane reached the side of the imperiled man.

"Hold!" he cried, in a commanding tone. "The first man who lays a hand on that rope eats lead!"

In either hand he held a cocked revolver, and on his face was a look which showed that he meant what he said. For a moment the entire crowd was awed.

"Furies!" snarled High Card Harry. "Will you cower before a single man, men of Jasper? Down with the velvet fop, and up with the traitor!"

"Go a little slow!" warned Vane, calmly. "I am not alone. You are surrounded by the men of Jacktown. If you have not already had enough of us, just go ahead with your lynching bee."

"Whoopee!" cried the camp vagabond, as he pushed through the crowd and placed himself at the little man's side. "Sweet Violets an' I kin lick yer hull crowd, an' we've got lots o' backers."

At this instant Laughing Lu urged her horse right into the crowd, which was forced to make way for her.

"What means this outrage?" cried the brave girl.

For the first time Violet Vane saw her face, and involuntarily a cry of amazement broke from her lips. But she had not yet glanced at her lover's defender; her flashing eyes were fixed upon the now silent crowd.

"Speak!" she exclaimed. "Explain this dastardly attempt at murder! What has this man done?"

"The jig is up!" muttered High Card Harry, as he slunk into the crowd. But one of the men from Jasper City replied:

"He is a traitor, miss. He got here ahead of us, and warned Jacktown that we were coming."

"Is that all?"

"That's enough. We have lost about twenty horses, and a dozen of us have been wounded."

"Which was an easier punishment than you deserved," declared the fearless girl. "You came to this camp, intending to destroy the place. Mr. Morris only did his duty in warning the people of Jacktown. He is no traitor, for the honest, law-abiding citizens of Jasper had nothing at all to do with this move."

The men remained silent.

"I command you to release that young man and allow him to depart unmolested," continued Laughing Lu. "You have seen fit to call me the Queen of Jasper City. Will you obey your queen?"

"Bet yer boots!" cried one rough fellow. "Hooray fer ther queen!"

The crowd caught the spirit and cheered, and from that minute Ned Morris stood in no further danger of lynching.

Violet Vane removed the noose from the young man's neck and cut the bonds which held his hands behind him.

Ned sprang to Laughing Lu's side.

"How in the world came you here?" he demanded, both surprised and delighted.

She smiled a little, and then looked unusually grave, as she replied:

"I can hardly tell myself. An intense feeling that you were going into deadly danger caused me to secure this horse and follow you. I arrived just in time, it seems."

Their eyes met in a quick glance which spoke volumes.

"We will speak of it later," said Ned, in a low tone. "There are too many around for us to say much just now."

She understood him and bowed.

"But I had friends ere you came," he added. "Let me present you to the man who so fearlessly came to my aid and faced the whole crowd. I have not yet learned his name, or thanked him."

He assisted her to dismount, and, a moment later, Violet and Laughing Lu were face to face.

"This is my friend, whom I owe—" began Ned, to be interrupted by a cry of surprise and joy from the girl.

"Philip, my brother!" burst from her lips.

"Luona!"

And, regardless of the amazement of the throng, the two flew into each other's arms.

Erastus Wagg gazed at them a moment in astonishment, and then with an unexpected delicacy of feeling in one so uncouth, he turned away and pushed into the midst of the crowd, saying in low, yet sharp tones:

"Git outer this, ye durned gawkin' ginnys. Wat ye starin' at? This hain't our funeral, an' thar hain't none o' us needed hyer."

The men took this broad hint, and promptly moved away from that vicinity.

After the joy and surprise at the meeting was over, Violet Vane asked:

"How under the sun came you here, Lu? I supposed you far, far away."

With a few words she explained everything, and when she had finished, she declared:

"You are a wonderfully plucky little girl, sister mine. I never dreamed that it was in you. I am more than proud of you. But at the same time I am afraid that you have made a bad move in coming to this wild country."

"I fear that I have been followed."

"Followed—by whom?"

"A detective, who is searching for you," and then she told him of Solomon Snide.

"Well, it isn't best that he interferes with

me now," said Vane, a hard look resting on his face for an instant. "The Burnton bank robber is not far away, and until I have sufficient proof to convict him and have placed him in the grip of the law, I will not go back to the East. No detective can drag me back in irons!"

"Do you really think that you have found the real robber?" exclaimed Lu eagerly. "Who is he?"

"I am not ready to call his name just yet, sister mine," smiled the Velvet Sport. "You shall know in good time."

"That is all I ask. But, we are forgetting Ned. Where is he? Ned!"

The young man had moved away a short distance, but turned quickly at her call. She motioned for him, and he came forward.

"Ned, this is my brother, Philip; Phil, this is Ned Morris, of whom I wrote you."

The two young men clasped hands.

"I am happy to meet you, Mr. Morris," said the man in velvet, frankly. "My sister wrote me of you, and I felt that I should like you when we met. Now I know that I was not mistaken."

"I am glad to make the acquaintance of Luona's brother, whom she often praised in glowing terms," responded Ned. "And I have to thank you for so quickly coming to my assistance when my life was in danger. I believe you would have cowed that mob, had not Luona appeared."

"Now, Ned, that's not fair," laughed the girl. "You ought to give me the honor of rescuing you from the mob."

"I do, Lu. Without doubt you saved my life. I only said that I believe Mr. Howard would have done so had you not appeared."

"But that takes away half the satisfaction of having acted as a rescuer," protested Lu.

"Let's seek a shady spot and have a quiet chat," suggested the brother.

"Then this is the place beneath this tree," was the girl's quick decision.

Ned hitched to the tree the horse which Lu had ridden from Jasper City, and then the trio sat down together. Ned and Vane seemed to have become fully acquainted in a moment, and the three were soon talking pleasantly.

The crowd had moved away a considerable distance, and seemed to have formed in a ring around a common center. Soon a cheer and a burst of laughter came to the ears of the three beneath the tree.

"That sounds well," said Vane. "I should say that the trouble between the two camps was nearly settled for to-day."

But it was not.

The woolly-headed man came limping toward the trio, holding onto his back with one hand, and grinning in a "sheepish" manner.

"You're wanted over there, Sweet Violets," said Wagg. "They want ye ter take er whirl with ther champion rassiler. I thort I c'u'd down 'im, but I've changed mer mind since we clinched. Wish I c'u'd change mer back now fer ther one I had er short time ergo. I never knew w'at er blamed ole fool I wuz till I tried ter rassil with chain-lightnin'."

CHAPTER XVII.

HICKORY JIMMY TAKES A TUMBLE.

ONE by one, nearly the entire population of Jacktown had issued forth from the camp to witness the exciting events which were transpiring on the outskirts. For a time the less courageous ones kept at a safe distance, but gradually they approached and mingled with the throng near the center of excitement. Judge Blowbugle was about the last to appear, and although he was still very pale from his recent fight, he endeavored to conceal all signs of trepidation.

"This is er galorious vict'ry," declared the judge—"a galorious vict'ry! We've g'in 'em er lesson as they won't soon fergit, I reckon. I am proud ter be er citizen uv Jacktown—yes, sir, proud! It is really er great honor, an' er satisfaction ter know thet one is livin' 'mong hones', fearless men—men as will not quail at the cannon's mouth. There are as great heroes ter-day as there uster wuz uv old, an' we've got scores uv 'em in this hyer camp uv Jacktown."

The judge witnessed the struggle between Hickory Jimmy, the wrestler from Jasper City, and the unsuppressible woolly-headed man. Erastus Wagg was handled almost as easily as a baby would have been. The crowd could not suppress a laugh at the comical aspect of the woolly-headed man, as he arose after the second fall.

"Jeehocus!" he grunted, as he rubbed his

back. "Thet's w'at I call gittin' settled. Guess I don't want ter rassil sum more."

"Hev ye got enny good men in yer dirty camp?" asked the wrestler from Jasper, with a sneer. "You fellers may be able ter play keerds, but it takes a hull *man* ter down Hickory Jimmy. There can't none ov yer sweet-scented posy fops in velvet an' tall hats do *thet*."

"Bet yer two ter one they kin," shouted Judge Blowbugle from among the crowd. "Whar's Violet Vane?"

The men of Jasper City sent up a cry of derision.

"Fetch erlong ther leetle runt, an' I'll break his neck," shouted Hickory Jimmy.

"You've contracted er mighty big job, partner," grinned Erastus Wagg. "He has downed the best men o' Jacktown."

"That is all I want ter know of your best men," declared the wrestler.

"Waal, I'll go git him," said Erastus. "Pr'aps you'll shift yer 'pinion arter he gits holt o' ye."

And with these words, the woolly-headed man moved away toward the spot where Vane, Ned and Laughing Lu were seated beneath the tree which had so nearly served as a gallows.

The crowd watched with interest to note the success of Wagg's mission, and when they saw that Violet Vane did not arise and come forward at once, a hoarse murmur arose.

"I'll bet er tenner ther leetle runt won't cum," cried Hickory Jimmy.

"I'll take ther bet," shouted Judge Blowbugle.

But the money was never staked, for at this moment the Velvet Sport was seen to arise and come forward with Erastus Wagg.

"He says he hain't much onter the rassil," observed the woolly-headed man, as the two reached the crowd; "but he'll try ye a hustle, ef ye'll 'gree ter handle 'im easy."

Hickory Jimmy laughed in a malicious manner.

"Oh I'll handle 'im *easy*," replied he—"I'll handle 'im like I wuz his own mammy." But to High Card Harry, at his elbow, he muttered: "I'll break ther durned leetle whelp's neck, see ef I don't."

Hickory Jimmy was about five feet and ten inches tall, and weighed at least one hundred and eighty pounds, every ounce of which appeared to be bone and muscle. He was a handsome-built man, and his face would have been called handsome by many, but there was a certain hard look, concealed by the drooping mustache, and an evil glitter in the eyes which told of a cruel nature. The wrestler was utterly without a conscience, and had as lief maim or even kill a man to accomplish his own ends.

Violet Vane surveyed Hickory Jimmy from head to foot, and at once decided on his character.

"I hope to meet one white man among the gang," thought the Velvet Sport; "but I guess they are all toughs of the first water."

"Come," cried the wrestler, "if ye are goin' ter try me er clinch, peel off yer coat, sonny, an' jump rite inter ther ring."

"It will be well enough to make some arrangements before the match," said Vane, coolly.

"Rangements! Match!" sneered Hickory Jimmy. "W'at 'rangements ye wantter make? So ye think it 'll be er match, do ye? Waal, I reckon it 'll be a mighty one-sided one."

"Don't you go fer ter bet yer clo'se on thet, fer ef ye do, ye'll go home naked," declared Erastus Wagg, promptly.

"If I am going to wrestle, I would like to do so in a good-sized ring," said Vane, quietly. "Unless parties are chosen to keep the crowd back, it is pretty sure to jam toward the center until the wrestlers have no chance at all. Now I propose that six men be chosen to keep the crowd back; three of the six to be from Jasper City and three from Jacktown. Do you agree?"

"Anything to satisfy you," replied Hickory Jimmy.

"All right. Pick your three, and I will choose mine."

Less than half-a-minute was consumed in this matter. Then Vane once more spoke up:

"Who is to be referee?"

"Referee?" sneered the wrestler from Jasper City once more. "W'at d'yer want ov er referee? I'm goin' ter settle yer hash so thet it won't need no referee."

"Still I insist upon a referee," said Vane, firmly. "This is not going to be boys' play."

"Then pick yer referee," cried Hickory Jimmy. "I'll fix this business so't he can't decide only one way."

"Then," smiled the little man with the violets, "I shall select Judge Blowbugle, of Jacktown,

a square and honest man, who will give a just decision, even if it is against himself. Do you accept him as referee?"

"He's good ernuff,"

Judge Blowbugle pushed out of the crowd, looking very grave and dignified. Out came his red bandanna, and he blew his nose with remarkable vigor.

"Gentlemen," he said, flourishing the handkerchief, "I thank you for this great honor, and I promise you a fair decision."

Erastus Wagg looked as if his feelings were hurt. Catching Vane by the elbow, he said, reproachfully:

"Hev ye clean fergct me, leetle pard? I'd like ter do suthin' fur ye, ef 'twa'n't more'n hole yer hat."

"No, Erastus, I have not forgotten you," answered Vane, with a smile. "I don't forget my friends, old man. You are to be my second."

"Lord love ye, pard!" exclaimed the woolly-headed man, his face suddenly beaming with joy. "I thort it e'u'dn't be, but my heart did git pritty well down inter mer boots. I guess ye know ther ole wool-top is reddy ter stan' by ye through thick an' thin."

Hickory Jimmy chose High Card Harry as his second.

Finally Violet Vane began to strip for the contest. He removed his hat, coat and vest, then off came his collar and necktie, to be followed by the "b'iled" shirt, leaving him stripped to a thin white knit undershirt. With some surprise, many of the crowd noted that the little man was much better built than they had thought; but in no way did he seem a match for his brawny, muscular antagonist.

Hickory Jimmy refused to wrestle by any set rules. It was to be a rough-and-tumble struggle for the mastery, the two best falls out of three deciding who was the victor. When both men were ready, Judge Blowbugle gave the signal:

"One, two, three—CLINCH!"

In an instant they were at it, and with a groan of dismay, Erastus Wagg saw that Hickory Jimmy had secured an advantageous hold.

"Good Lawd!" he gasped. "I'm 'feered he's er goner this time!"

But Violet Vane had failed thus far to display the best mettle there was in him, and the citizens of Jacktown had not yet correctly gauged his ability. When he found that the wrestler of Jasper City had secured an advantageous hold, he knew that he would have to do his level best if he came off the victor on the first round.

"Durn ye, down ye go!" gritted Hickory Jimmy.

But the Velvet Sport did not go down so easy, and his antagonist soon found that he had a harder job on his hands than he had bargained for. Round and round whirled the two men; back and forward they swayed.

The entire crowd scarcely breathed. Suddenly a great shout went up. The first fall had been made, and—

Hickory Jimmy was at the bottom!

"Whoopee!" squealed Erastus Wagg, leaping into the air and waving his old hat over his head. "I knowed it! Hooraw fur Sweet Violets! Jacktown forever!"

"Fn'st flop fer Jacktown," decided Judge Blowbugle.

Then the men of Jacktown expressed their delight in a series of yells which would have done credit to the same number of Indian warriors.

The wrestlers retired to their respective sides. Sitting on High Card Harry's knee, Hickory Jimmy muttered between his gasps:

"Blame his hide! I didn't believe it wuz in 'im."

"How did he do it?" asked Harry.

"Don't ask me. It wuz a new trick w'at I've never seen afore. But I'll throw 'im ur kill 'im next time!"

"That is right, fur you *must* down him. Break his back if you can. If you finish him, you will save me the trouble."

"Waal, I'll work er trick onter 'im this time w'at he never see before."

"Time," cried Judge Blowbugle.

Both of the wrestlers came up smiling and clinched in the middle of the ring, but this time Hickory Jimmy did not appear to obtain a superior hold.

"Five thousan' dollars on Sweet Violets!" roared Erastus Wagg. "Five thousan' erg'in' er thousan'—five ter one!"

But no one paid any attention to the woolly-headed man. Every eye was fastened on the struggling wrestlers. This time the contest was fierce but brief.

Suddenly a groan of dismay burst from the

lips of Violet Vane's friends as they saw the Velvet Sport go over backward. But the groan turned to a cry of amazement and delight.

How was it done? Barely did the little man strike the ground when his knees were planted against his antagonist's breast and his toes touched Hickory Jimmy's body near the hips. Then the Velvet Sport's feet shot upward, and the champion wrestler of Jasper City was hurled into the air, to turn over and land on his back a few feet away. The force of the fall knocked the breath from Hickory Jimmy's body and nearly deprived him of consciousness.

Violet Vane was upon his feet in an instant, and another wild yell went up from the throats of his admirers; but above everything else sounded the cry:

"Fire! fire! Jacktown is on fire!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

AWAY IN PURSUIT OF THE KIDNAPPERS.

A COLUMN of smoke was rising near the center of the camp. In a moment the crowd around the two wrestlers saw it, and a shout went up from half a hundred pairs of lips.

"Treachery!" yelled a stentorian voice. "Ther galoots uv Jasper hev played us foul!"

Then two-thirds of the crowd made a break for the camp.

Erastus Wagg thrust Violet Vane's clothes and hat into the little sport's hands. In a moment the velvet dandy slipped on his vest and coat, and clapped the hat upon his head.

"Come on, Wagg!" he shouted.

"I'm with ye, pard," answered the woolly-headed man, at his side.

"What did you do with our rifles?" asked Vane, as he ran.

"Left 'em at ther fu'st shanty byer."

"Secure them both and come to the fire," shouted the Sport; then he shot ahead of his companion, running like the wind.

Into the camp dashed the Velvet Sport, in the very van of the crowd. He had noticed that his sister and Ned Morris were no longer beneath the tree where he left them, and he concluded that they were somewhere in the camp.

Past the dead horses, which marked the course of the defeated invaders from Jasper City, he dashed, and soon came in sight of the burning cabin. Only one building was on fire, but the flames seemed to have secured a fatal hold on that. However, the men at once went to work to extinguish them if possible, and to protect other buildings in the vicinity.

Suddenly Ned Morris appeared at Violet Vane's side, and caught the little Sport by the arm.

"There has been foul work at the hotel!" cried the young fellow, excitedly. "I went there with Luona, and, by the merest accident, she discovered a gentleman gagged and bound in one of the upper rooms. She called me, and when the gag was removed, the gentleman said that two masked ruffians had placed him in that position, and carried away his daughter."

The Velvet Sport waited to hear no more. Like a shot he sped away toward the hotel, followed by Morris and several who had heard the young man's hasty story.

Into the Silver Bell, and straight up to Owen Wilson's room dashed Violet Vane. He found his sister and Mr. Wilson in the room. The girl was just releasing the Easterner from the final cords which held him in his chair. Vane was by his side in an instant.

"Mr. Wilson," he cried, "what has happened? lone—where is she?"

"They have carried her away!" shouted the nearly distracted father, leaping to his feet and attempting to rush from the room.

Vane caught hold of the excited man and fairly lifted him from the floor, as he carried him back to the chair.

"Now," said the Sport, with remarkable coolness, as he forced Mr. Wilson into the chair, "tell me everything that has occurred, and use as few words as possible. By doing so, you will put us on the track of the kidnappers in the shortest possible time."

But, even in that moment of intense excitement and agony, Owen Wilson recognized the man in velvet.

"You are Philip Howard," he declared.

"I am, but it makes no difference who I am now! Talk lively and straight, if you want to save your daughter."

Mr. Wilson comprehended his meaning. Several men had followed Vane into the room, and now the door was blocked by others. He spoke to them, instead of the man before him.

"We were alone in this room, he said.

"Nearly all the people had left the place, and the hotel seemed deserted. Suddenly two

masked men sprung in upon us, with cocked revolvers in their hands. They threatened to shoot me dead if an outcry was made, and said that neither would be harmed if we made no resistance. Almost before I knew what they were doing, they bound me to this chair and gagged me. Then they threw a cloth over Ione's head and carried her away."

"How long ago did this happen?" asked Vane, his flashing eyes alone revealing his excitement.

"I don't know—it seems that it has been hours. I thought no one would ever come, and I suffered tortures indescribable. Oh, gentlemen, save my child!—save her from—"

Violet Vane's white hand closed over his lips, shutting off his appeal, and quickly, firmly, the little Sport said:

"We will do everything in our power, Mr. Wilson, but not an instant must be lost in useless talk. Can you describe the two kidnappers?"

"I can only tell that one was tall and one was short. Both spoke in a manner which plainly indicated that they were trying to disguise their voices."

"One tall!" exclaimed Violet Vane, with a sudden suspicion. "Where is Dandy Dirk?"

"Here," responded the hotel proprietor, as he pressed into the room, giving Vane a fierce glance from beneath the bandage which he still wore around his head. "Don't try to ring me into this foul piece of devilry!"

"Where were you when the outrage took place?"

"That is none of your business," replied Dandy, coolly; "but I don't mind saying that I was with the crowd outside of the town. If I thought that you meant anything by that question, hanged if I wouldn't give you a chance to repeat the dose of a short time ago!"

Vane saw in an instant that Dandy Dirk intended to force him into a quarrel, for the probable purpose of delaying the pursuit of the kidnappers, and he deliberately turned his back upon the tall gambler, saying to Mr. Wilson:

"Ione shall be rescued if it lies in my power. I will immediately organize a party and go in pursuit of the scoundrels who have dared to lay hands on her."

Owen Wilson sprung up.

"I am going with you!" he cried. "Do you suppose I can remain idle while my child is in danger?"

"Gentlemen," cried Violet Vane, "you have heard of this outrage. Let every one who can procure a horse, prepare to pursue the kidnappers. Don't lose time, for every second is precious!"

The Velvet Sport saw that Dandy Dirk's eyes were fixed on him with a malignant stare, and for a few brief seconds he fastened his own dark, magnetic orbs full upon his foe's. It was a battle of eyes, and the little man won. Dandy's gaze wavered and fell, and Vane felt that the man would not dare to cross his path again that day.

When he reached the hotel steps, Vane witnessed a scene of confusion. The fire had been gotten under control, and hearing of the kidnapping, the excited people had made a rush for the hotel. The crowd was discussing the cause of the fire—which was destined to be forever wrapped in mystery—and the dastardly act of the two masked ruffians, who had dared to lay hands on the handsomest female that had ever entered the town.

But a welcome sight for the Velvet Sport was Erastus Wagg, who stood in the street near by, holding both his own ancient-looking white horse and Vane's magnificent animal. In a moment the little man was at the eccentric fellow's side.

"Hi, there, leetle pard!" cried the woolly-headed man. "Hyer's yer boss. I heerd 'bout ther gal-stealin' an' kinder thort you'd want yer pony. Hev they kerried off ther gal fer er fac'?"

"Yes, they have, Erastus," was Vane's reply, as he looked to his horse's saddle-girth. "But I do not fancy they have much the start. There was only one way for them to escape from the town without being observed. They could not go toward Jasper, therefore they must have gone the other way."

"Ef they kerried her out o' town a tall."

"I have thought of that. The place must be searched, and if we do not return ere night, the upper and lower pass must be guarded to prevent the kidnappers from carrying her away, should she be hidden in town and not discovered. Remain by the horses a moment longer, and I will attend to that matter."

He moved away and was absent less than three minutes. When he returned, he was surprised and delighted to see at least twenty mounted men who were ready to follow the kidnappers. Mr. Wilson was among the number, mounted upon a fine horse, which he had purchased for the occasion.

"The matter is fixed," cried Vane, as he vaulted into the saddle.

"An' report says that ther durned gal-stealers was seen hurryin' outer town with their prize by way o' ther sou'west pass," said Wagg.

"Then let us be after them!" burst from the velvet dandy's lips. "Come on!"

And with a cheer on their lips, which was answered by a shout of encouragement from those left behind, the pursuers swept out of Jacktown.

CHAPTER XIX.

VIOLET VANE'S DESPERATE BATTLE.

"PARDS we've got ter fut it. We're clost' outer ther critters, ur they w'u'dn't 'a' deserted their hosses an' tuck round ther Devil's Bend afoot. They mean ter give us ther clean shake over among yon hills."

The speaker was an old hunter and prospector, who had successfully trailed the kidnappers into the heart of a very wild country within a few miles of Jacktown. Suddenly the pursuers had come upon the kidnappers' horses, which had been deserted by the desperate villains, who had taken to a narrow and difficult trail, which wound around a mountain-side.

"And must we leave our horses here?" asked the Velvet Sport.

"Fer sure," was the reply. "Two men must remain behind an' guard 'em."

"Oh, Moses!" groaned Erastus Wagg. "An' has a feller got ter fut it?"

"Thet's 'bout ther size uv hit, unless he stays ahind an' looks out fer ther horses."

"Then I'll fut it," was the instant decision. "I want ter be in at the wind-up o' this hyer jubilee."

It did not take the party long to dismount and choose two of their number to guard the horses while the remainder continued in pursuit of the kidnappers. Violet Vane tried to induce Mr. Wilson to remain with the guards, but his efforts were useless. The distressed father was determined to continue with the party.

The old hunter and prospector took the lead, and more than one of the party found it difficult to follow him. Violet Vane, however, seemed absolutely tireless, and kept close behind the guide.

Higher and higher went the trail, and each moment it grew more difficult. Finally the men found themselves skirting the verge of a vast abyss which was known as Pluto's Pit. The trail led around the "rim" of the great basin, the distance across which was at least a quarter of a mile. At the right of the pursuers was the precipitous mountain wall, rising upward; at their left, a sheer descent of thousands of feet to the bottom of Pluto's Pit.

"There they are!"

The cry suddenly burst from the lips of several of the pursuers, and looking ahead, Vane saw a dark figure just disappearing beyond a point of rocks, around which led a rocky path scarcely a foot in width.

Like a flash he sprung past the guide, and went flying along that narrow trail at a pace which astonished the old fellow. Nor did Velvet Sport seem to slacken his pace when he reached the narrow ledge which served as a path around the point of rocks. Some of the pursuers halted aghast, expecting to see the daring and reckless fellow lose his footing and plunge to his death at the bottom of Pluto's Pit.

But, suddenly, a most unexpected thing occurred. As the velvet dandy leaped along the ledge, the pathway literally dropped from the mountain-side, and a great mass of earth and stones went plunging downward into the depths of the terrible abyss!

A cry of horror burst from the lips of those who witnessed this catastrophe, for they expected to see Violet Vane go down with the landslide.

But he did not.

Before their astonished eyes the lithe figure seemed to cling to the face of the wall as a fly might have done. And as they gazed, breathless with suspense, he swung himself forward and disappeared around the rocky point. A few vines and crevices among the rocks had saved him from death.

A long, gasping breath of relief came from the spectators when Vane had vanished.

"Geelory ter Moses!" muttered the irrepressible Erastus, as he wiped cold drops of perspira-

tion from his face. "Thet wuz a snug squeeze fer ther boyee!"

"But how are we to follow him?" panted Owen Wilson, who had succeeded in keeping up with the pursuers. "There seems to be no way of getting beyond that point."

"An' thar ain't none," asserted the guide. "We are left, as fur as follerin' ther dirty kidnappers is consarned."

"And we must give up the pursuit?"

"Guess thet's ther hull bigness uv hit," acknowledged the old prospector.

Mr. Wilson uttered a groan and sunk down helplessly.

"My poor child!" he moaned.

"Now don't ye go fer ter took on yet erwhile," cried Wagg. "Sweet Violets has got ercross ther gap, an' he'll press them galoots clost'. Ye kin bet on him every time."

"But what can one man do?"

"Er durned heap w'en he's er man like that leetle cuss. Give him hafe er show an' he'll lick ther all two o' them varmints as kerried off ther purty gal."

"We shell hev er chance ter see ther skunks w'en they kem roun' on t'other side uv ther basin," announced the guide, pointing across the great sink. "Right over thar the trail runs in plain view fer er right smart distance. It skirts ther edge as clost' as this heer duz, only it's wider."

In a moment every eye was fixed on the point indicated, and all watched attentively.

"Ther leetle man can't be fur ahind them," observed one of the party.

"Lawd luv ye!" exclaimed the guide; "he's right clost' outer them! Ther only chance fer savin' the gal ter-day is fer 'im ter down both uv ther kidnappin'imps o' Satan."

"Ef he duz that I reckon Jacktown 'll lose two uv her citizens," remarked one of the party.

"Waal, it won't be no great loss, fer ef I ain't mighty mistooken, them fellers are Blizzard Ben an' Tiger Joe—both durned skunks."

"You've named 'em!" chimed half a dozen voices.

"Them hosses w'at they took wuz Dandy Dirk's, an' thet'd be ernuff ter hang 'em if they hadn't scooped ther gal."

"Is there no way to get around this basin, so that we can continue the pursuit?" anxiously asked Mr. Wilson.

The guide glanced at the sun, which was well down toward the western peaks, before he replied.

"Yes, thar's er way," he answered; "but we'd haf ter git pritty well back toward Jacktown, an' by ther time we got roun' whar we c'u'd take up ther trail it 'u'd be plum' pitch dark. We c'u'dn't foller it then. Ef ther gal's resky'd ter-day ther leetle man 'll hev ter do it, an' no mistook."

"Then I fear that her fate is sealed!" groaned the unhappy father.

"There!" shouted one of the watchers. "Look across! There they are in plain view!"

Every man saw the two abductors running along the verge of the great basin. Both ran as if well winded. Tiger Joe was a few feet in advance, and Blizzard Ben followed, with the girl in his arms.

Suddenly all of the watchers uttered a cry in chorus, for at that moment young Vane appeared in close pursuit. The Sport was not more than six rods behind the kidnappers, and was gaining on them at every spring.

Suddenly Tiger Joe wheeled and waited until Blizzard Ben passed him; then the fire-eater threw up his hand and there was a puff of smoke, but Violet Vane never paused. By the time the report of the weapon reached the watchers' ears the two men had clinched.

"Whoop!" cried Erastus. "Sweet Violets will cook his bash in short order. Here's a thousand on it!"

But Violet Vane was to have great odds to contend with, for Blizzard Ben, placing his unconscious burden on the ground, turned back to assist his partner.

"Great heavens! they will murder him!" gasped Owen Wilson.

A moment later the big ruffian was doing his utmost to aid his companion. Here and there lunged the threemen, swaying, struggling, madly fighting for life. Unable to make a move to help the Velvet Sport, the spectators held their breath, and watched the desperate battle on the narrow trail close to the verge of Pluto's Pit. It did not seem possible that the little man could vanquish his two foes.

No sounds of this struggle reached the ears of the anxious watchers across the sink, but they fancied that they could almost hear the panting breathing of the three men. At times all three

would seem to totter on the very verge of the precipice.

Suddenly Vane threw one of his adversaries down and tore himself from the other's grasp, when those steel hammer fists got in their work, and the kidnappers were knocked down as fast as they could spring up. But they seemed to have remarkably hard heads, for neither of them staid down for five seconds.

"Great jimcracks!" gasped the woolly-headed man. "See thet durned leetle runt paste 'em!"

Finally the kidnappers succeeded in closing in with their little foe again, and, in a moment, Vane went down. Then a knife flashed in Blizzard Ben's hand, and he struck straight at Vane's throat. But the blade was broken on the rocks, for, like an eel, the supple Sport slipped from beneath his foes. In another moment they were up and at it again.

And now both of the kidnappers did their best to hurl the Velvet Sport into Pluto's Pit. Twice they carried him to the very brink, and he surged back with them. The third attempt proved fatal, for young Vane broke away so suddenly that both were left tottering on the brink of the precipice, and then, with one wild yell of horror, went plunging down to death, locked in each other's arms.

CHAPTER XX.

THE END OF THE JUBILEE.

The darkness of another night had settled over Jacktown ere the pursuers returned. But, just at twilight, two horsemen dashed into the camp in Paradise Gulch, yelling at the full capacity of their lungs, and firing their revolvers into the air. Thinking of a second attack from the Jasper City gang, who had left the place hours before, the citizens seized their weapons and rushed to the doors and windows.

But, the two horsemen proved to be the advance couriers of the returning party who had started out in pursuit of the kidnappers. In a remarkably brief space of time, those who had not left the camp knew the result of the chase, and Violet Vane's name was on every lip. In the opinion of nearly every one, the velvet dandy had proved himself the best man who ever trod the soil of Paradise Gulch, and hasty preparations were made to give him a grand reception when he appeared.

The returning party moved slowly, as Ione was still weak from the excitement through which she had passed. After her recovery, to find Violet Vane by her side, she was obliged to walk, with his assistance, more than three miles before a point was reached where the pursuers could meet them with horses. There they waited, Vane saying that he dared not go further, for fear of choosing a wrong course, and getting lost among the hills.

Night was at hand when the pursuers, who had witnessed Vane's desperate battle, came up. It is impossible to describe the joyous meeting between father and daughter; but when it was over, Mr. Wilson turned to the Velvet Sport, holding out his hand.

"God bless you, Philip!" he said, brokenly. "You have done a hero's work to-day, and when I forget it I shall be past remembering anything."

Vane grasped Owen Wilson's hand warmly, noting with delight the beam of joy in Ione's eyes.

Needless to say that they had come to an understanding long ere this.

With difficulty, Erastus Wagg suppressed his admiration for the Velvet Sport for the time, but, when he reached Jacktown, he was able to make up for lost time.

When the returning party came in sight of the camp in Paradise Gulch, they discovered that the place was brilliantly illuminated from one end to the other. At each end of the town huge bonfires had been built, and the red flames were leaping merrily. The approach of the returning party was soon discovered, and a large crowd of citizens met them before they reached the circle of light made by the bonfire.

Then followed a surprise for the party. Somewhere in Jacktown the enthusiastic citizens had discovered a snare and base drum, and a fife. It was not difficult to find men who could play these instruments, and a drum-corps had been swiftly organized. The musicians were among those who met the returning party at the outskirts of Jacktown.

Blowbugle, who seemed to be taking charge of the proceedings, soon formed the party into marching order, with the musicians at the van. When everything was ready, the judge gave the order to march. Just as the circle of light made by the bonfire was reached, the drum-

corps struck up a lively air, and it soon became apparent that they were no amateur players.

Into Jacktown came the party, to find the whole town ablaze with light. Every lamp, candle, and pine-knot in town was on duty. The citizens were out *en masse*, and the stirring music sent the blood dancing through their veins. A wild cheer went up as the party appeared, and, an instant later, there was a thunderous report, which shook the ground and broke the glass in scores of windows.

In lieu of a cannon, the citizens had brought two anvils into use, and with the aid of plenty of powder, they served the purpose very well.

Along the main street of Jacktown the victorious party made its way, the people cheering themselves hoarse. At the head of the party tramped Judge Blowbugle, a long staff in his hand, head up, neck as stiff as a stake, never glancing over his shoulders. The three musicians followed close behind, in a very creditable line. The fifer was blowing his best, the snare-drummer's drum-sticks danced over the sheep-skin in an astonishing manner, and the base-drummer seemed bound to burst the head of the big drum. Behind the musicians rode Ione Wilson, with her father at her right and Violet Vane at her left hand. The woolly-headed man was in the next line of three, and his good-natured face literally gleamed with the glory of the occasion.

It was a sight such as Jacktown had never witnessed before.

Down the main street of the camp went the party, and when the Silver Bell Hotel came in view, they saw that it was brilliantly lighted from top to bottom. Beside the door, in front of the building, a rude platform had been hastily constructed, so that it could be easily reached from the steps.

There the crowd halted, and the pompous judge made a passage through the throng, by which Ione, Mr. Wilson and Violet Vane could pass to the building. Ned Morris and Laughing Lu met them at the door, the girl being fairly beside herself with excitement and joy.

A moment later the hotel door shut off the view of the shouting multitude.

Preparations had been made for their reception in one of the best rooms of the house, and soon Ione was reclining upon a rude but comfortable cot, weak from excitement and fatigue, but with her heart full of happiness.

"Oh, Philip!" cried Vane's sister. "I have the grandest news for you! The Burnton bank-robber has been arrested!"

"What!" shouted both Vane and Mr. Wilson in chorus.

"The Burnton bank-robber has been arrested, and you are a free man! The man, Solomon Snide, whom I suspected of being a detective, was truly an officer, but he was not searching for you! Like many others, he did not believe your story when you declared that you were the robber, and from that time he has been working on the case. He got on track of the real robber, and trailed him into this part of the country. When he saw me at Jasper, he became desirous of knowing if you were in these parts, and attempted to quiz me. To-day, since you left in pursuit of the kidnappers, he appeared in Jacktown, and at once spotted his man. He now has the real robber confined in this building, under arrest. A requisition will be obtained, and he will take him back to the scene of his crime."

"And who is the robber?"

"Thomas Alicar, known in this place as Dandy Dirk, the proprietor of this hotel!"

"Ah, I thought so!" cried the Velvet Sport. "He is the very man whom I lost trail of in the South. Thank God! this affair is cleared up at last, and I am once more a free man with an untarnished name!"

Owen Wilson arose to his feet; Ione had already started up upon the cot.

"This has been a day of astounding events," said Mr. Wilson, slowly, and with a great effort; but, more astounding than everything else in the revelation which I have just heard. Not only does the apprehension of the real robber make you a free man, Philip Howard, but it clears my name of the stain upon it. Nor is that all. It shows me that I have been blind and unjust, for I have believed that you were truly the robber of the Burnton Bank. But words fail me. It is impossible for me to express my admiration for one who sacrificed his own honor and imperiled his own liberty that I might go free! Philip—lad—take my hand! God bless you!"

And the tears ran down Owen Wilson's face, as he pressed the young man's hand. Then he led Vane to Ione's side.

"Philip," he said, "never has she ceased to

assert your innocence. She has been true as steel."

Their eyes met, and from that moment their souls were united by an imperishable bond.

But they were not given much time for talk. The excitement in the street had continued. The music of the fife and drum-corps still sent the citizens' blood leaping through their veins, and they loudly called for the Velvet Sport.

Judge Blowbugle found his way to the room where the little party was collected.

"S no use," declared the judge; "you'll hev ter cum down an' show yerself ter ther boys, ur they'll yell theirselves plum' crazy."

Vane consented to go.

"I'll make er leetle speech," said the judge, "an' will interjuce ye. Then you must cum out. Ther hull blessed town's jest clean gone onter ye."

"But thet ain't all. They're yoopin' fer ther gal. I've tried ter s'plain thet she's dead beat out, but they want one look at her. She needn't cum down. Jest throw open thet winder there an' 'pear in it at the right time. They've heerd as how Miss Howard ain't goin' back ter Jasper, an' they want ter see her, too—Hullo! here's ther feller w'at giv us ther warnin'. We must hev him down below."

Thus the judge arranged the entire affair.

Ned and Vane went down with the master of ceremonies, but at his suggestion the Velvet Sport remained within the building until the judge should call his name. Ned followed the pompous old fellow out upon the platform.

As Blowbugle appeared, the music ceased and the crowd became quiet. Out came the judge's red bandanna, and he blew his nose in a manner that was simply terrific.

"Feller-citizens," he cried, flourishing the handkerchief above his head, "this is a great and galorious occasion for Jacktown. Ther ervents uv this hyer day will long be remembered in hist'ry. Frum this day Jacktown shell prosper. We hev met ther galoots uv Jasper an' they are ourn. We hev downed them in er fair an' square tussil an' downed them fur good an' all. They sought ter play us foul, but an honorable man risked his life ter warn us uv our danger. Hyer he is!"

Then the throng gave Ned Morris a hearty cheer.

"But thet ain't ther hull on't," continued the judge. "You know thet Jasper stole our queen, an' w'en another came, two uv our dirty citizens as wuz er disgrace ter Jacktown, kerried her away, bein' hired ter do so by one as is now under arrest fer robbin' an Eastern bank. But she wuz rescued an' is safe in camp. Ther one thet ye called Laughing Lu is hyer, too, an' ter-nite Jacktown has two queens. *Thar they be!*"

And the judge waved his hand toward the open window, in which Ione and Luona appeared with their arms around each other's waists.

And then the whole assemblage *did* cheer in earnest! The shout that went up was fairly deafening.

As the two girls bowed and retired from the window, Blowbugle continued:

"This mornin' we wuz trodden under fut by Jasper, an' ther citizens uv thet camp taunted an' reviled us in our teeth. They said we had no men, but we met them, an' one man cleaned out their card-sharp, High Keerd Harry. Ther same leetle man like to bruck their champion rassiler all ter pieces. Ther same man worsted Blizzard Ben an' Tiger Joe in an oneven tussle, an' sent 'em to their just deserts at ther bottom uv Pluto's Pit. Who is thet man? He is Philip Vane Howard, an' he stan's before you, ther best leetle man in ther hull glorious city uv Jacktown!"

The Velvet Sport appeared on the platform.

What a yell went up from that entire crowd! How they shouted and flung their hats into the air! How the anvils roared and the ground trembled! But, above all that din was heard the voice of Erastus Wagg, the woolly-headed man, as he bellowed:

"Hooraw fer Sweet Violets, ther best man in Collyrado! Hooraw! Hooraw!"

THE END.

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- 218 Tiger Tom, the Texas Terror.
- 224 Dashing Dick; or, Trapper Tom's Castle.
- 228 Little Wildfire, the Young Prairie Nomad.
- 238 The Parson Detective; or, The Little Ranger.
- 243 The Disguised Guide; or, Wild Raven, the Ranger.
- 260 Dare-Devil Dan, the Young Prairie Ranger.
- 272 Minkakn Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter.
- 290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy.
- 300 The Sky Demon; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.
- 334 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.
- 409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.
- 417 Webfoot Mose, the Tramp Detective.
- 422 Baby Sam, the Boy Giant of the Yellowstone.
- 444 Little Buckskin, the Young Prairie Centaur.
- 457 Wingedfoot Fred; or, Old Polar Saul.
- 463 Tamarac Tom, the Big Trapper Boy.
- 473 Old Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic.
- 482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan.
- 562 Blundering Basil, the Hermit Boy Trapper.

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- 23 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
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- 64 Dandy Jack; or, The Outlaws of the Oregon Trail.
- 82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk.
- 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
- 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
- 123 Kiowa Charley, the White Mustang.
- 139 Judge Lynch, Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
- 155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
- 169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack from Red Cora.
- 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
- 198 Arkansas; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
- 207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
- 215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Topknot's Crusade.
- 231 Plucky Phil; or, Rosa, the Red Jezebel.
- 241 Bill Bravo; or, The Roughs of the Rockies.
- 255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Bowie.
- 267 The Buckskin Detective.
- 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
- 294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowie Blade of Cochetopa.
- 302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trigger Bar Bally.
- 316 Old Eclipse, Tramp Card of Arizona.
- 326 The Ten Pards; or, The Terror of Take-Notice.
- 336 Big Benson; or, The Queen of the Lasso.
- 345 Pitiless Matt; or, Red Thunderbolt's Secret.
- 356 Cool Sam and Part; or, The Terrible Six.
- 366 Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective.
- 386 Captain Outlaw; or, The Buccaneers' Girl Foe.
- 396 Rough Rob; or, The Twin Champions of Blue Blazes.
- 411 The Silken Lasso; or, The Rose of Ranch Robin.
- 418 Felix Fox, the Boy Spotter.
- 425 Texas Tramp, the Border Rattler.
- 436 Phil Flash, the New York Fox.
- 445 The City Vampire; or, Red Rolfe's Pigeon.
- 461 One Against Fifty; or, The Last Man of Keno Bar.
- 470 The Boy Shadow; or, Felix Fox's Hunt.
- 477 The Excelsior Sport; or, The Washington Spotter.
- 499 Single Sight, the One-Eyed Sport.
- 502 Branded Ben, the Night Ferret.
- 512 Dodger Dick, the Wharf-Spy Detective.
- 521 Dodger Dick's Best Dodge.
- 528 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadows.
- 538 Dodger Dick, the Dock Ferret.
- 543 Dodger Dick's Double; or, The Rival Boy Detectives.
- 545 Dodger Dick's Desperate Case.
- 563 Dodger Dick, the Boy Videoq.
- 573 The Two Shadows.
- 582 Dodger Dick's Drop.
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- 610 Old Skinner, the Gold Shark; or, Tony Sharp on Guard.

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- 62 The Shadow Ship; or, The Rival Lieutenants.
- 75 The Boy Duellist; or, The Cruise of the Sea-Wolf.
- 102 Dick Dead-Eye, the Boy Smuggler.
- 111 The Sea-Devil; or, The Midshipman's Legacy.
- 116 The Hussar Captain; or, The Hermit of Hell Gate.
- 197 Little Grit; or, Bessie, the Stock-Tender's Daughter.
- 204 Gold Plume; or, The Kid-Glove Sport.
- 216 Bison Bill, the Prince of the Reins.
- 222 Grit, the Brave Sport; or, The Woman Trailer.
- 229 Crimson Kate; or, The Cowboy's Triumph.
- 237 Lone Star, the Cowboy Captain.
- 245 Merle, the Middy; or, The Freelance Heir.
- 250 The Midshipman Mutineer; or, Brandt, the Buccaneer.
- 264 The Floating Feather; or, Merle Monte's Treasure Island.
- 269 The Gold Ship; or, Merle, the Condemned.
- 276 Merle Monte's Cruise; or, The Chase of "The Gold Ship."
- 280 Merle Monte's Fate; or, Pearl, the Pirate's Bride.
- 284 The Sea Marauder; or, Merle Monte's Pledge.
- 287 Billy Blue-Eyes, the Boy Rover of the Rio Grande.
- 304 The Dead Shot Dandy; or, Benito, the Boy Bugler.
- 308 Keno Kit; or, Dead Shot Dandy's Double.
- 314 The Mysterious Marauder; or, The Boy Bugler's Long Trail.
- 377 Bonodel, the Boy Rover; or, The Flagless Schooner.
- 383 The Indian Pilot; or, The Search for Pirate Island.
- 387 Warpath Will, the Boy Phantom.
- 398 Seawolf, the Boy Lieutenant.
- 402 Isodor, the Young Conspirator; or, The Fatal League.
- 407 The Boy Insurgent; or, The Cuban Vendetta.
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- 462 The Born Guide; or, The Sailor Boy Wanderer.
- 468 Neptune Ned, the Boy Coaster.
- 474 Flora; or, Wizard Will's Vagabond Pard.
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- 511 The Outlawed Middy.
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- 525 Brothers in Buckskin.
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- 535 The Buckskin Rovers.
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- 550 Lafitte's Legacy; or, The Avenging Son.
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- 591 Delmonte, the Young Sea-Rover.
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